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Fighting Cancer With Cookies

By ELIZA POUND



Gretchen Holt-Witt

Gretchen Witt thought she might have been overreacting when she took Liam, her 2½-year-old son, to the doctor because he had stopped eating foods that he usually loved. She thought he might have had an iron deficiency.

After visiting the doctor and spending the night in the hospital, Liam went from "a healthy child" to "stage-four cancer," Mrs. Witt explained. She asked Liam's doctor, "How could I not have known that pediatric cancer is the biggest child-killer in the U.S.?"

Mrs. Witt, a resident of Manhattan and the director of public relations at OXO, a consumer products manufacturer, knew she had to do something to raise research funds for pediatric cancer, the top disease-killer of children. She thought of a bake sale fundraiser and set a goal of 96,000 cookies.

"Initially, I think my husband thought I was a little crazy," she said laughing.

"I'd be at the hospital pushing an IV pole down the hall following Liam and I'd be on the phone with somebody who owns a bakery saying, 'OK, so how do I find 300 pounds of butter?" she recalls.

Mrs. Witt found a kitchen in Brooklyn and opened up shop with a friend. They had no customers, no prior experience, no reputation and a lot of cookies to sell. But she did have friends and support. Some 250 volunteers turned up to help bake. Firefighters from a firehouse in Chelsea also came to help; Liam had befriended the firefighters. By day eight or nine, she had sold 96,000 cookies and brought in more than \$420,000 in donations.

After several more bake sales, Mrs. Witt and her husband, Larry, launched the nonprofit, Cookies for Kids' Cancer. All funds raised go to pediatric cancer research. Since 2008, the organization has had more than 4,000 events in 14 countries. By the end of this year, the organization will have provided grants of more than \$4 million, says Mrs. Witt.

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Liam, who died in January 2011 at age 6½, is the inspiration for the organization and for Mrs. Witt, who says that she doesn't want other families to go through the same pain as her family. She says the funds raised from that first bake sale were funneled to a treatment that would have helped her son. But the treatment only became available late last year, months after Liam died. "Shows you how real this is," Mrs. Witt said.

When Mrs. Witt was writing Liam's eulogy, she wanted to reflect on the love that Liam shared with people. Her final message and the message behind the organization is to: "Love like Liam."

Mrs. Witt can't believe what her son inspired, "Well, I can, but I can't." She explained how Liam loved to cook. "He loved to bake and he thought it was the best thing ever." Every time a new registration comes in for another bake sale, Mrs. Witt talks to Liam about how proud she is of what he has encouraged.

On Saturday, Cookies for Kids' Cancer will host their annual Hamptons bake sale in Amagansett Square. This year, the charity has partnered with several top New York chefs, like Christina Tosi of Momofuku Milk Bar and Karen DeMasco of Locanda Verde, to offer gourmet cookies.