Suggested headline:

*From family tragedy, to building purpose and hope*

**By Bill Barth and Stephanie Klett**

Is anything more noble – or more daunting – than the challenge of chasing a cure for cancer?

We can’t imagine what that might be.

Consider the William Guy Forbeck Research Foundation. Born of tragedy, the organization for more than 35 years has combined innovative approaches and scientific brainpower to support and pursue life-saving progress.

“Billy” Forbeck was just 10 years old when, in the fall of 1983, his family suffered the terrible blow of learning the boy’s diagnosis with neuroblastoma, an incurable cancer afflicting about 650 children annually. For 13 months the Forbecks pursued treatment and hope wherever they could. Nothing worked. At age 11, they lost Billy.

In grief, Billy’s parents – George and Jennifer Forbeck – found inspiration and purpose. In 1985 they established the foundation, to bring together experts in the field of oncology and scientific research to exchange ideas, think creatively and reach for groundbreaking strategies. George, a commodities trader at the Chicago Board of Trade, found strong support among his colleagues to help finance the fledgling program.

The foundation’s first cornerstone – called the Annual Forum – was held that fall, bringing together 12 leading scientists on the topic of neuroblastoma. Subsequently, programs have been held in various locations, including Lake Geneva, the Forbeck family’s longtime home.

We had the opportunity this month to attend a foundation-sponsored event at The Bottle Shop in downtown Lake Geneva, featuring two leaders in the field of cancer research, Dr. Navdeep Chandal of Northwestern University and Dr. Pippa Cosper of the UW-Madison. The program was moderated by Jamie Forbeck Collins, the foundation’s executive director and Billy’s younger sister.

We will not try to convey all these two very smart researchers had to say. Instead, let us just report it was informal, they were open and pleasant and inclusive, and, best of all, the message they brought is about hope. While cancer research is complicated, time-consuming and expensive, great strides are being made to bring effective treatments to people who desperately need it.

The Forbeck family has been touched personally by cancer, more than most. Cancer claimed Billy, and Billy’s father George. Jamie’s mother, Jennifer, had her own battle with cancer but is doing well, and attended this month’s program.

“We have been able to take a horrible family tragedy and carry on to help others,” Jamie told us in an interview, saying as each year goes by “it’s time to do more.”

Most encouraging of all, she said, “We’re at a point where we’re seeing research come to fruition,” resulting in improved treatments and stronger survival rates.

“Pediatric cancers are now about an 80% survival rate,” Jamie said.

She’s quick to give credit to “the great contributors from the scientific community,” and generous donors who have made it possible over nearly four decades to grow and expand the collaborative forums.

The foundation’s Forbeck Cancer Forums are nearing 100 events since inception, with more than 1,000 leading scientists participating. Four Forbeck Scholars are recognized each year, a program designed to identify and support some of the most promising scientists at early stages in their careers.

Maintaining a full slate of scientific gatherings and research-oriented events requires planning and money, and while expressing appreciation for longtime supporters Jamie told us the foundation “needs to get better at finance.”

A year ago Marla Schrager joined the team as associate director, to help address outreach and events in support of fundraising. With a background in trade association management, Marla wanted to put her talents to work for a worthy cause.

“Ultimately, that’s part of what led me to work for the Forbeck Foundation,” she told us. “I wanted to be in that space.”

She’s been hard at work with events planning. Upcoming activities include a pig roast May 4 on the Bella Vista Lakefront Lawn, and the 2024 Golf Outing June 3 at Lake Geneva Country Club. The foundation’s Blue Jean Ball, set Sept. 28, is a mainstay, and various other fundraising and awareness events are in the planning stages. She’s also working to identify more grant opportunities to build resources.

Donors make the foundation’s scientific meetings possible. Those gatherings have grown from once a year to 10 meetings annually, with a target of 20 or more for future years. Truly international in nature, the foundation has hosted meetings in Lake Geneva, Hilton Head, Colorado, California and Italy, and is actively pursuing opportunities to grow.

“We want to expand even more,” Marla said, “and that’s where the funding comes in,” allowing leading scientists to attend with no out-of-pocket expenses.

The cause became personal for Marla, who waged her own battle with cancer this past year. She’s doing well now but, ironically, experienced her sister being diagnosed with cancer at the same time as herself.

“I believed in everything the foundation is doing, but it has become even more meaningful to me now,” she told us.

Her sister’s recovery, Marla said, is due in no small measure to advances in immunotherapy, which has been a focus of the Forbeck Foundation’s programs for decades.

“Immunotherapy is the biggest, latest, greatest thing,” she said. “That’s what is helping my sister, who was stage 4. The Forbeck Foundation scientists were talking about that 30 years ago.”

It can take decades to move from a scientific concept to successful clinical applications that save lives. Supporting the kind of collaboration necessary to keep moving forward is a bedrock principle of the Forbeck Foundation.

The organization will mark its 40th anniversary in 2025. Leadership is planning various ways to observe the milestone through events and public awareness activities.

Most families have their own cancer stories. If readers are moved, here’s how they can help.

First, visit the William Guy Forbeck Research Foundation website (<https://www.wgfrf.org>). Tap the Donate button. Give what you can.

This is a truly engaging website. Informative and well organized. Down to earth yet scientifically compelling. Historically inspiring. Hopeful. Touching.

Jamie and Marla welcome inquiries from individuals and organizations interested in getting involved. There’s a contact page on the website that directs communications to the leaders. Joining the fight can be as simple as attending foundation events, to contributing financial assistance, to volunteering where possible and, importantly, helping to make connections with companies and philanthropists interested in backing the cause.

We’re all finding our way through life, and we believe it’s both important and fulfilling to seek out opportunities to make a difference for people who need a hand. The William Guy Forbeck Research Foundation, rooted in Lake Geneva, is a wonderful example of how tragedy can be turned toward hope.

Help if you can.

*Bill Barth is the former Editor of the Beloit Daily News, and a member of the Wisconsin Newspaper Hall of Fame. His wife, Stephanie Klett, is the President and CEO of Visit Lake Geneva, and the former Secretary of the Wisconsin Department of Tourism.*