



Mended
Little
Hearts

Max's Mom Named New Leader for MLH

by Jon Caswell



Susan Vanderpool with her son, Max

“Dynamo” is a good word to describe Susan Vanderpool, the new national committee chair of Mended *Little* Hearts. “Well-organized” would also fit since she remains the coordinator for MLH of Tulsa, which she started. And, of course, “multi-tasker” is also accurate, because she’s still the full-time mother of three-year-old Max, who was born with Tetralogy of Fallot and significant peripheral pulmonary stenosis. He has had 11 surgeries (not all heart-related), including a bovine valve replacement in October 2006 when he was not yet a year old. Before Max was born, Susan, age 43, was a computer network administrator for a large corporation. She has been married to Max’s father Tom, an optometrist, for 13 years and they have two grown children.

That brief resume does not communicate the tremendous energy that Susan has brought to her work as the coordinator of MLH of Tulsa. She has put together a wide-ranging public awareness program studded with creative outreach events.

For instance, she partnered with the football team at Bishop Kelley (BK) High School last fall. Two coaches on that team have heart babies and are members of MLH. “Their head coach, J.J. Tappana, called me before school started to ask us to work with his team of 60 players,” Susan said. “BK is a private school and all these boys come from affluent homes. Most don’t know what it’s like to have hardships, and Coach Tappana wanted to bring ‘reality’ to their lives and show them that not everybody has it so easy.”

Seeing an opportunity to educate tomorrow’s parents, Susan agreed to partner with the team. Each month half a dozen players

attend MLH group meetings; half play with the children while the others attend the meeting and report to the team what the group is doing. They initiated the partnership with a pool party and barbecue at Susan's house; the football players were lifeguards and gave the MLH kids rides on a four-wheeler and taught them how to rope a metal "cow." During the school year, the players have assisted at different events, like a spaghetti-dinner-and-concert fundraiser last fall. This spring they volunteered to help out again. "We've received several generous donations from the players' parents," Susan added.

Bishop Kelley's first home game of the season, against Memorial High School, was also a CHD/MLH awareness event. "During halftime our kids were escorted onto the field by a football player, and their names and ages were announced as well as the player's name," Susan said. "At the time we had one Mended Little Angel, Emma (now we have two) and one baby in the hospital waiting on a heart transplant, and each of them had a football player walk alone in their honor. Our youngest member is Zyron, who was three months old, and his big brother Randall plays for Memorial. When Randall carried his little brother onto the field, the stadium erupted into a standing ovation from both sides." Also good PR: The announcer announced the spaghetti dinner and concert and MLH parents handed out flyers at the gates. "It was an amazing evening. I got calls for weeks from people who couldn't make the dinner but wanted to make a donation."

In addition to helping at events, the football players are getting involved with the children through a "big buddy" program – a player will be matched with a CHD child and spend a day with that child, getting to experience all the restrictions he or she lives with. Before next fall Susan also plans to contact the Memorial High coach about doing an awareness event at one of Memorial's home games. "Whoever they play that evening, I'm going to approach that team's coach and ask him to have a CHD/MLH awareness night at one of his games ... and on ... and on ... Do you see a pattern forming here? It can't hurt to ask when we have the potential to reach hundreds of people this way."

Last September MLH of Tulsa participated in the Aloha Ride, in which motorcyclists raise money on a motorcycle ride to honor a young man who died in a motorcycle accident. MLH was chosen as the recipient in 2008. "Unfortunately it rained that day, but we still had 22 bikers and 10 cars of people, and now 35 more families know about MLH."

In addition, Tulsa's MLH parents are touching the lives of new CHD parents through a very active visitor program. "Pediatric cardiology staff makes sure we know of every patient scheduled for surgery. We have 10 moms and dads, and they are doing a great job making sure no family is alone in the hospital with a CHD child," Susan said. "Alexia Fussell is our visiting coordinator, and she is doing an amazing job."

Max is the reason behind all this work, and he is doing quite well. He has progressed from one-word responses to full sentences and has taken up "spelling everything from 'elephant' to 'octopus,' 'ball' to 'rocket,'" Susan said. "After all 11 surgeries, he has awakened from the anesthetic with a smile, never crying. He has the most dazzling spirit and go-get-'em attitude – his nickname is Mr. Happy. I think that pretty much says it all."



TOP TO BOTTOM:

Max Vanderpool, better known as Mr. Happy

Melanie and Grant Goldman at CHD/MLH Awareness Night

BK football players teamed up for an MLH pool party

MLH-Tulsa parents gather for CHD/MLH Awareness Night

Half-time at CHD/MLH Awareness Night



TOP TO BOTTOM:

Stacey and Grant Eby at last summer's pool party

Sydney Ashbaugh was a big hit at last year's Aloha Ride

Hayden Spohrer and Tanner Webster like the big bikes

Of course, in true MHI fashion, when you do a good job, you get a bigger job, so now Susan is bringing her creativity, enthusiasm and organizational skills to her new job as national committee chair for MLH. She is just getting her feet wet but knows some of what she wants to do: "I think we will benefit from more public awareness so potential coordinators will hear about us and want to start a group in their area. I want to work towards making the coordinators' job easier by providing them with more-detailed starter packets. I would like to have an online tutorial on some of the more pertinent parts of the MLH manuals as well as some of the tried-and-true program ideas."

Executive Vice President Dale Briggs has been active in developing MLH during his two terms. He interviewed Susan for this position. "Susan is one of the most dynamic MLH leaders we have. She is very organized and seems to have the commitment and time to move this organization forward."

"The best word for Susan is 'amazing,'" said Jodi Lemacks, National Program Coordinator for MLH. "She has so much energy and drive and is constantly thinking of ways to help others. She was already helping the coordinators, by setting up a system so they could purchase products for their groups, even before becoming Committee Chair."

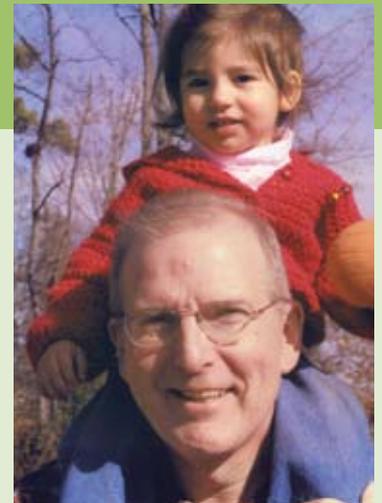
"We're really excited to have someone of Susan's caliber spearheading MLH," said Executive Director Tim Elsner. "She'll pick up the reins from another remarkable leader, Amanda Eason, who did so much to bring the program where it is today. Susan's energy, enthusiasm and overall smarts make her a great fit for this position."

The final word goes to Susan: "I want to urge MHI members to support their local MLH groups. Your knowledge, connections and life experiences are invaluable to us. MHI Chapter 8 has been a huge support to MLH of Tulsa, especially president Ken Meinhart and his wife Glenda and Southwest ARD Keith Beard and his wife Narvelle. They are a big reason we are here today. Most of our coordinators are young moms with busy lives, and we always need people to help play with the kids during our meetings, and who would be better than readymade 'grandparents' who understand the fears we all deal with when it comes to heart defects/disease? If you have free time on your hands and would like to spend it with some of the most fantastic kids you'll ever meet, we can provide you with some moments that will make your mended heart dance with joy." ❤️

LOSS of a FRIEND

Pediatric cardiologist Dr. Page Anderson, an enthusiastic supporter of Mended *Little* Hearts and a distinguished faculty member of the Duke School of Medicine, died while attending an NIH-sponsored conference in November. He was 66 years old. Dr. Anderson was a world leader in the study of changes in cardiac structure from fetus to adulthood and was deeply involved in training the next generation of pediatric cardiologists.

He was well-loved by CHD families because he made it a priority to keep families informed about their children's heart conditions while in the hospital and included families in all the planning for their child's care.



Dr. Anderson with granddaughter Kloe McGranahan