

# Harley's Helpers Angel Ministry

Lending a hand to Katy children and families suffering from cancer

*Written by Kirsten Ham | Photography by Jason Lehecka*

When Dana Ruppert of Katy learned her 2-year-old grandson Harley was suffering from cancer, the life-changing news broke her heart. Over the next several months, little Harley underwent tests and treatments. After Harley tragically lost his fight with cancer, the family heard about Adam's Angels, a cancer support organization out of Brenham. Inspired by their good works, Ruppert decided to begin Harley's Helpers Angel Ministry in the Katy area to lend support to local families coping with a child suffering from cancer.

## A Bundle of Joy

In July 2008, Ruppert received the life-changing news that Harley was being transported to Texas Children's Hospital, where an ultrasound revealed masses on both of his kidneys. Harley's parents Jonathan and Rebekah Ruppert started what would be many journeys to and from Texas Children's Hospital over the next year. Jonathan describes Harley as a lively bundle of joy. "You couldn't pull one over on him," Jonathan laughs. "If you gave him change, he wanted dollars. He was always alive, even when he was in the hospital."

Harley's ordeal included tests, scans, chemotherapy, biopsies, surgeries, radiation, and various infections, which ultimately sent Harley to the pediatric intensive care unit, where his lungs collapsed. "He was a brave little man who woke up daily to take on life with all the energy he could muster, in spite of what was happening to him," shares Ruppert.

## Turning Tragedy into Ministry

Dr. Heidi Russell, head of the neuroblastoma team at Texas Children's Cancer Center, delivered the news that broke their hearts. Harley's cancer was back and too aggressive to treat any further. "I had seen other families in the conference room and heard their cries and emotional outbursts," Ruppert recalls. "But I never thought we would ever be there." Just shy of his third birthday, family and friends said their final goodbyes to Harley.

Inspired by Adam's Angels out of Brenham, Dana Ruppert

knew she had to honor Harley's giving spirit and love of life. Ruppert and her Rejoice class at First United Methodist Church of Katy set to work creating Harley's Helpers Angel Ministry. Volunteers held fundraisers and enlisted local businesses in their cause. "We've been able to help so many kids and families, it's unbelievable," says Diane Plouse, a Harley's Helpers volunteer.

## Providing Comfort and Care to Families

Harley's Helpers focuses on the many needs that insurance does not cover, such as parking tokens, gas cards, toiletry bags, and meal coupons. "We come and we show them love and compassion, as well as meeting physical needs," says Ruppert. "When you're sick like that, I don't care how bright your room is, there's never enough sunshine."

Families are recommended to Harley's Helpers through schools, churches, and word of mouth. "Dana will go to the hospitals and visit with families," says helper Carol Rogers. "She doesn't know them, but she loves on them just the same; there's a bond there."

Beginning in June each year, the organization hosts a school supply drive to gather supplies for children attending cancer center schools. "Last year, no child at MD Anderson had to bring their own school supplies," Ruppert says proudly. The organization also hosts Harley's Fun Fest, marking Harley's August birthday and Christmas in March with pizza, prizes, and crafts.

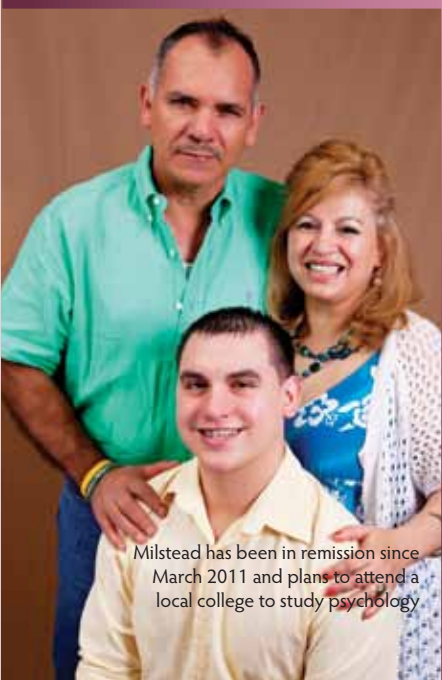
## Receiving Unexpected Support

Katy High School graduate Andrew Milstead remembers the day his life changed forever and the unexpected support he received from Harley's Helpers. After years of pain, he learned he had stage four testicular cancer after not passing a physical as a high school sophomore.

After being told five times that he was going to die, Milstead took on his final eight-hour surgery. "That's the day I met



Cancer survivors Samantha Loos-Polk and Andrew Milstead hold a photo of Harley Ruppert, the inspiration behind Harley's Helpers



Milstead has been in remission since March 2011 and plans to attend a local college to study psychology



Harley's Helpers volunteers make shawls, blankets, and companion bead bracelets to give to those fighting cancer

# Support Harley's Helpers

Contact First United Methodist Church  
of Katy at 281-391-2121  
or email Dana Ruppert at  
harleyshelpers@aol.com.

To learn more about the organization,  
visit [harleyshelpersangelministry.org](http://harleyshelpersangelministry.org)



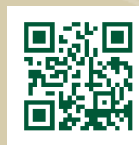
Loos-Polk and  
Dana Ruppert,  
founder of  
Harley's Helpers  
Angel Ministry

Loos-Polk, who began remission in  
May 2011, is heading to St. Thomas  
University to study pediatric  
oncology nursing

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Milstead credits friends Anthony Ramirez, Katy ISD's Travis Saldana, and fiance Ernestina Gonzalez with helping him through some very dark days



Dana Ruppert,” he says with a smile. Harley’s Helpers arrived in full force with financial assistance, hand-made shawls and blankets, companion bead bracelets, and lots of love. Milstead’s mother, Gigi Calvert recalls, “She overheard that my son had cancer, and she just showed up. She didn’t even know us, but she stuck with us through everything.”

In addition to paying utility bills and providing gas cards and other financial assistance, Harley’s Helpers was able to gift Milstead with a laptop computer. Even though he was homeschooled, the gift allowed him to graduate with his classmates. “She really listened to me and took time with me,” says Milstead. “She was the only one from an organization that kept coming back.”

### Extra Support and Encouragement

Samantha Loos-Polk, now a senior at Seven Lakes High School, was very active in martial arts and training for the Junior Olympics when what seemed like a simple back injury changed everything. “I was very tired,” Loos-Polk remembers. “I kept getting bruises and red spots all over. It took so much energy just to go to school.”

The physicians confirmed the worst: Loos-Polk was suffering from acute lymphoma leukemia. She began a lengthy process of undergoing many tests and a nine-month stay at Texas Children’s Hospital after she developed a rare fungal infection that spread throughout her body. She is actually the longest known survivor of this type of infection.

Her parents, James Polk and Margaret Loos-Polk were fortunate to be able to be with their daughter in the hospital. “I was never alone,” she says. “Dad only went to our house four times in the nine months I was in the hospital. Mom traveled back and forth to work.” Margaret remembers Harley’s Helpers bringing in supplies, hosting parties for children, helping families with the day-to-day expenses, and being a lively treat for children in the hospital. “It’s amazing how much Dana is willing to give back after her loss,” she says. “People can take a tragedy and turn it into something powerful.”

### A Future of Smiles

Harley’s Helpers’ goal is that they will never have to turn a family in need away. Although they rely completely on donations, they have always worked within their means and helped in every available capacity. Families are encouraged to contact Harley’s Helpers and let them know about their situation. “You are not alone, even on that darkest day,” Ruppert says. “There are people out there who want to love you and be there with you.” KM

*KIRSTEN HAM enjoys being on the editorial team at Katy Magazine and has a great respect for provisional ministries, having lost her own childhood friend, Katy Kidd, to brain cancer at age 13.*



James Polk and Margaret Loos-Polk are grateful to Harley’s Helpers for providing support and encouragement as their daughter Samantha battled cancer