

# *Comforting with* **Teddy Bears**

The Joe Joe Bear Foundation of Katy provides hope and encouragement by giving stuffed bears to seriously ill children

*Written by Noreen Stavinoha  
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Joe Joe Bear founder Jeanette Maurer with Taylor Velasco, who received a surprise teddy bear from the organization after battling Hodgkins lymphoma, and her mom Stacey Velasco

Jeanette Maurer of Katy still remembers what her godson Joe Ordaz told her as he lay in his hospital bed fighting leukemia. “I wish I could do something for the kids, because I hear them crying at night,” he told her. Joe Joe, as he was nicknamed, was in his early 20s at the time. “I don’t want my life to be for nothing,” he told Maurer. She had given him a teddy bear to hold when she couldn’t be there with him, and he found comfort in that loving gesture. After his tragic death, she started the Joe Joe Bear Foundation in his

honor. The local group provides new teddy bears to seriously ill children to help comfort them when they are lonely or scared.

## **Brightening a Child’s Day**

Maurer spent every possible hour with Joe Joe until he finally succumbed to the disease, and after his death, his words came back as inspiration. If he found comfort in a stuffed bear, she reasoned, then others would, too. With Joe



Joe's bear perched on a shelf as motivation, Maurer and her husband, Al, began collecting bears and putting the word out to hospitals in the area. Names of children and young adults were soon arriving, and the very first bear was delivered to Caitlyn Mortus, a Katy teen suffering from a cancerous growth in her jaw.

Another child touched by the foundation was Taylor Velasco, who had Hodgkins lymphoma. She is in remission now, but she was very sick when Maurer got her name. "She had lost her hair and hadn't been able to go to school," shares her mom, Stacey Velasco. "She was feeling pretty low. The surprise of getting a bear in the mail brightened her day for sure. Two years later, and she still has it on a shelf in her room."

It soon became clear that there were other life-threatening illnesses afflicting children and young adults, so the

"The main thing we do is give teddy bears," says Maurer, adding, "We also hold bi-monthly blood drives. We want to create awareness of the need for blood for these sick children. We've done a bone marrow registry twice." The foundation has no overhead expenses, because everyone is a volunteer. That means every penny earned in fundraisers goes toward purchasing new teddy bears for children. To Maurer, her computer serves as the foundation's office and her dining room table serves as the group's boardroom. The five board members meet quarterly to plan events, and they frequently speak to groups about their work, accompanied by one of the bears.

### Helping Children Across the U.S.

The foundation has also used Facebook to reach out to children and teens battling serious illnesses across the country. Marissa Wilcox, a teen in Pennsylvania, made contact with Maurer through Facebook. Wilcox has a rare



Maurer delivers a teddy bear and smiles to a young Katy patient

foundation broadened its reach. Robin Harmeson's son Liunes, who is only 21 months old, suffers from a serious heart condition that may require a transplant in the future. His bear was delivered after an open-heart surgery in February, and it has been a constant part of his life ever since. "The bear definitely goes with him for every hospital stay," Robin shares.

### Hugs and Bears

The Joe Joe Bear Foundation is always accepting donations of new teddy bears to give to local children. On the first of each month, foundation volunteers deliver about 350 bears to children at area hospitals. Each hospital requests a certain amount of bears in advance, and foundation volunteers then deliver donations to hospital volunteer services departments. The Joe Joe Bear Foundation also works with the Ronald McDonald House, which has adopted a theme of "hugs and bears."

liver disorder and will eventually need a liver transplant. Her special Joe Joe bear sits on her bed as a constant reminder that people care and are there for her.

"We want to be nationwide," says Maurer. "We would love to have bears in the hands of every sick child in the U.S. There have been a few sent out of state. When we get emails, phone calls, or messages on Faceook from sick children around the country, we mail them a bear and call it an emergency bear. We've only been around for three years, and already we've given out more than 10,000 bears."

### Thankful for Katy's Support

The Katy community has given its overwhelming support to the foundation's fundraisers and blood drives. A few Katy schools have even held teddy bear drives. They hope

to get even more Katyites involved in their outreach work, including high school students who can volunteer with tagging the bears. Each tag has the foundation's name on one side and its mission statement on the other: a non-profit organization that provides new teddy bears to children with cancer or other life-threatening illnesses to have comfort nearby 24/7.

When Roger Boneno first heard the foundation's mission statement at a business networking event, he knew he wanted to be part of the team. He's already working with two other charities, but he still finds time to serve on the foundation's board of directors. "I have two kids of my own, and the thought of a 10- or 11-year-old being sick and alone at night after visiting hours really bothered me," Boneno shares. He saw the value of those bears from a parent's viewpoint. **KM**



*NOREEN STAVINOCHA enjoys life in Katy and loves to tell the stories of interesting people.*

## Make a Donation

Monetary donations and new teddy bears can be mailed to the Joe Joe Bear Foundation at 1846-B Snake River Rd., Katy, TX 77449.



## Attend the Bears for Hugs Golf Classic

The foundation will host the fundraising event on Sept. 24 at The Club at Falcon Point. Registration begins at 10 a.m., and the tournament follows at 12 p.m. To register, visit [joejoebear.org](http://joejoebear.org).



Liunes, who suffers from a serious heart condition, carries his bear with him every time he visits the hospital



Liunes, shortly after open-heart surgery, with his teddy bear



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