

Bennett's Bears



After being diagnosed with brain cancer, Bennett Nester's family decided to bless others who were going through similar situations

After a devastating diagnosis, a Katy family jumps into action providing joyous smiles to over a thousand hospitalized children in the Houston area

Written by Meagan Clanahan | Select photography by Kimberly Oehrlein

Randy and Brande Nester never imagined they would spend Christmas 2011 at Texas Children's Hospital (TCH) fighting for their young son Bennett's life. They also never anticipated that just two short years later their garage would be filled to the brim with all shapes and sizes of donated Build-a-Bears.

After Bennett received a special gift while inpatient, the idea of "Bennett's Bears" was born to encourage and provide joy to children hospitalized. "The bear is something tangible

they can hold onto until they are in their own bed," says Nester.

Crushing Diagnosis

Fresh to the Houston-area and parents to a seemingly healthy 20-month-old, the Nesters were shocked when Bennett was diagnosed with a pineal pilocytic astrocytoma, a large tumor located in the central part of his brain, which was obstructing blood flow to critical areas. Nester credits both her mother

and mother-in-law for noticing the initial symptoms, seeing that he was struggling to walk at times and that his step seemed “off.” Her mom, who is long-time day care owner, took Bennett to the pediatrician with a gut feeling that something may be wrong.

“My heart went into my stomach when I got the call,” Nester recalls. “They told me I needed to head to the doctor’s office immediately.” The doctor initially recommended scheduling an MRI in a few days, and then just mere hours later he called back with instructions to immediately head to the nearest emergency room for further evaluation.

One week before Christmas, the Nesters found themselves at TCH as doctors searched for answers on Bennett’s condition. After a CT scan showed not only the tumor but fluid on the brain, Bennett underwent several procedures to relieve the pressure and allow it to drain. “The doctors told us that with all the fluid, had we not discovered it, he would have soon

Building Bennett’s Bears

After getting Bennett home and their feet underneath them, the Nesters made good on their pledge during that dark hospital stay. Through word-of-mouth and a simple website, bears started to arrive at their home. That first year they handed out 250 bears, and in Christmas 2013 that number almost quadrupled, allowing them to stretch their reach to both Memorial Hermann Children’s Hospital and Shriners’ Hospital for Children in Galveston.

Bennett is the inspiration behind it all. “He is the reason I am here. Everything I do is because of him,” says Nester. “His illness motivated me to come down a path to something more, something bigger than us.”

Continued Journey

“Bennett is a normal, rambunctious 3-year-old,” Nester laughs. “He loves trains, playing with Lego’s, reading books just like any other toddler. You just wouldn’t know there was anything wrong with him.”



Brandy and Randy Nester love the chance to give back some of the generosity that was shown to them



Bennett’s Bears delivers stuffed teddy bears to children being treated at Texas Children’s Hospital

slipped into a coma, and then who knows what would have happened,” Nester shares.

A Surprise Gift

Stuck in the hospital when they should have been celebrating around a tree with their precious toddler, two sisters visited Bennett with a gift in tow. Having lost a sibling to cancer years before, they honored that memory by distributing Build-a-Bears to children who couldn’t go home for the holidays. After seeing Bennett’s thrilled smile and obvious joy, the Nester family immediately knew what they had to do. Nester turned to her husband and told him, “I want to do this. I want to give back and let these children know they are not alone. They don’t have to go through this by themselves. They can find strength in this huggable bear.”

Bennett faces another 12 months of weekly chemotherapy and their hope is that the chemo will prolong radiation of the tumor until he’s at least 7 years old. Because of where the tumor sits, it’s most likely this will be something that will never go away, even with surgery. And that’s where Bennett’s Bears provides strength for their family. “Bennett deserves our 100%. And while we give him our 100%, we can also give back. This is our release from everything - all the stress.” Seeing over 1,000 children beam with excitement as they clutch their bears lifts their spirits and gives them energy to walk with Bennett on his journey. **KM**



MEAGAN CLANAHAN is a Katy wife and mother of two who is inspired by those who create light out of dark situations.

How to help



Bennett's Bears

- Visit bennettsbears.com and click on the "Donate" tab
- Create a special bear online directly through the "Build-a-Bear" website
- Gift cards to Build-a-Bear may be mailed to 4506 Green Forest Pass, Houston
- Email brande@bennettsbears.com if you can help with donations and distribution



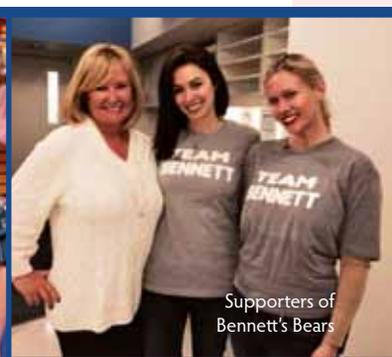
Bennett going through chemo at TCH



Team Bennett delivering bears at Texas Children's Hospital



Bennett is still undergoing chemo treatments but their outlook is positive



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