

JALA raises 28 percent of planned \$2.25 million endowment in first year

In the first year of a five-year campaign to build a \$2.25 million endowment for the Northeast Florida Medical Legal Partnership (NFMLP), Jacksonville Area Legal Aid has raised \$638,000, with \$365,000 coming from a 125 percent match Baptist Health made on \$284,000 in private donations.

“What that endowment will do is what no other legal aid has, which is create an opportunity to provide legal services to this pediatric patient population in perpetuity,” said Katy DeBriere, managing attorney for the NFMLP, through which JALA helps Northeast Florida children and their families overcome legal and economic barriers to child wellness. “So, we as legal aid will not have to worry about chasing another grant in order to provide services for these families. We can simply do the work and help the folks that we’re here to help.”

The endowment was established in December 2017 through an agreement between JALA and the Baptist Health Foundation. By the close of 2017, the first \$100,000 had already been raised.

The endowment would permanently fund the legal services DeBriere and others offer about 200 children annually whose medical conditions and quality of life are complicated by poverty. Through the NFMLP, DeBriere and other JALA staff attorneys, along with pro bono attorneys whose help they enlist, provide pediatric patients and their families legal assistance with issues such as access to insurance coverage, safe and sanitary housing and appropriate educational services.

Health-care institutions throughout Northeast Florida refer patients and their families to the NFMLP, including Wolfson Children’s Hospital, Nemours Children’s Specialty Care of Jacksonville, UF Health Specialty Pediatric Clinics, and Community PedsCare®, a pediatric program of Community Hospice & Palliative Care.

One such patient was Isaac Campbell, 13. From the day he was born two months premature, Isaac has depended upon specialized nursing and other therapies provided through Florida Medicaid.

“He can’t walk, he can’t talk, he can’t eat, but he can love,” said Isaac’s father, Jason Campbell. “When you look at him, the boy, his smile will win over any heart.”

But when Florida Medicaid cut off his benefits, Isaac lost access to the services that he’d depended on all his life, and nothing his parents did to challenge the denial of services was working.

Fortunately, Isaac’s health-care provider participates in the NFMLP and referred his case to DeBriere, who got his Medicaid benefits restored.

“When you say you have an attorney to assist you and the backing of legal aid to help you, doors seem to open up, and things that you couldn’t make happen magically happen for you,” said Brandie Campbell, Isaac’s mother.

Now, along with nursing care, Isaac receives the physical, occupational and speech therapy he needs to thrive.

“He is always a happy boy, but because of legal aid assisting with the process he has got a better quality of life and better chance for the future,” Jason Campbell said.

Gunster shareholder Mike Freed has been the driving force behind the fundraising effort for the NFMLP. He helped start the conversation about the Baptist Health match and has since created the most successful fundraising initiative in JALA's history, Freed to Run.

The six-day, six-marathon, 157-mile trek from the Florida Supreme Court in Tallahassee to the Duval County Courthouse in downtown Jacksonville featured Freed alone in its first year, but in 2018 he was joined by 17 teams, which together with Freed raised an average of more than \$10,000 each.

In addition to Freed to Run, JALA held a Bridges to Justice campaign kickoff in June at the offices of Nelson Mullins Riley & Scarborough that started 2018 donations flowing. Also, the Jacksonville Bar Association Young Lawyers Section directed \$42,170 raised through its October Tee It Up for Charity Golf Tournament to the endowment.

"Our goal over the next five years is to raise \$1 million, and if we do so Baptist Health will match that at 125 percent," DeBriere said.

Freed is committed to continuing Freed to Run and is looking for fellow marathon runners and relay teams to join him in the coming years in what he calls a "multi-level pyramid for good."

"Really, it's about the community coming together for a really positive cause," Freed said. "Ultimately, the great cause is what sells, the opportunity to help pediatric patients and their families."

But it's not only runners and golfers who can help JALA reach its million-dollar goal for the endowment. JALA President and CEO Jim Kowalski points out that JALA welcomes the involvement of anyone who is willing to help spearhead a fundraising effort or facilitate a major gift.

"We are extremely fortunate to have a broad cross-section of the community taking an interest in the NFMLP and other JALA projects that improve the lives of our neighbors and make our community stronger," Kowalski said. "Now is a great time for our supporters to harness that enthusiasm, whether it be through a house party or a crowdfunding campaign or some sort of event none of us has yet envisioned. We've seen through Freed to Run the immense power of a great idea coupled with persistent effort, and we are always ready to start more conversations about how to continue to move the needle."