

# Spotlight

Thanks to **YOUR** generosity

## From cancer diagnosis to cycling 65 miles

Denise knows all too well that ignoring unusual physical symptoms — however harmless they might seem — is a very bad idea.

There is a history of cancer in her family. Denise's mother passed away from breast cancer, and her dad is a prostate cancer survivor. "I learned early on that routine exams were key," she says. "But even more important, I always paid attention to anything that didn't seem normal."

So in 2018, when she noticed some abnormal gynecological symptoms, she told her doctor — even though she was almost sure they were just a part of perimenopause.

After some diagnostic testing, "I was shocked when I heard the words: 'You may have cancer,'" she says. She was only 49.

"I did not want to die young like my mom," she says. "And I couldn't bear the thought of causing that kind of pain and grief to my family if the cancer had a poor prognosis — they had already lost so much when we lost my mom."

Denise's doctor recommended a hysterectomy to

*(continued inside)* 



**“Donor gifts are making a difference. If I told you how many people along the way said ‘Smilow saved my life,’ you wouldn’t believe it!” DENISE**

determine conclusively whether she had cancer. “It was when I woke up from the surgery that I learned it was, indeed, endometrial cancer.”

Fortunately, the surgery eliminated Denise’s cancer. She didn’t need radiation or chemotherapy. But she’s being monitored closely by her doctors at Smilow Cancer Hospital as she makes her way to the five-year mark, when her chances of recurrence will be significantly reduced.

### **The worry never goes away**

“People say, ‘Hey, it’s so great — you beat it!’” Denise says. “But the worry never fully goes away. It’s there in the back of my mind, before every appointment, every mammogram or ultrasound, or with any pain.”

In 2019, Denise celebrated one year cancer-free by cycling and fundraising in the Closer to Free Ride to benefit Smilow Cancer Hospital and Yale Cancer Center. “I’ve ridden every year since to celebrate and

help others.” Last September, her fourth year, she rode 65 miles.

From the thousands of riders and families who gather at the Yale Bowl at dawn to the caregivers and patients who wait outside Smilow to say “thank you” to the survivors and their loved ones who cheer and hold up banners along the entire course, Denise never fails to be amazed at the vast number of people who are impacted by cancer.

“Community is the key,” she says. “That sense of community reminds you that whatever your differences are, there’s always something that connects us. That’s pretty powerful. Together, you can do more than alone.”

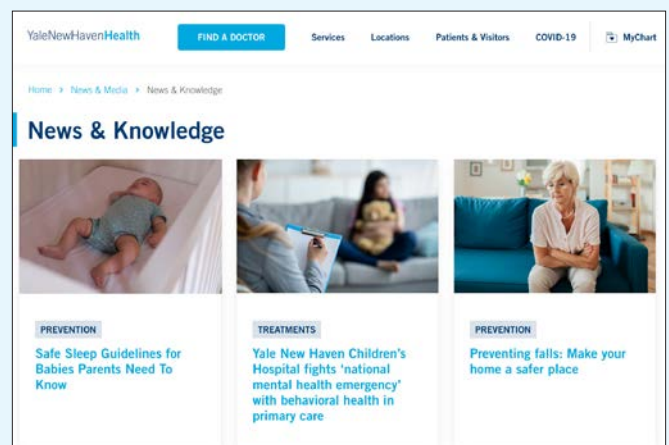
Closer to Free 2023 will be extra special for Denise. She looks forward to celebrating five years riding and five years cancer-free!

Closer to Free donors — YOU ARE HELPING SAVE LIVES! Thank you!♥

## **New: Information and inspiration for YOUR HEALTH**

Visit our **News & Knowledge hub**, a new resource for you to learn about the latest prevention strategies and treatments for the health issues that matter to you most — like what new parents should know about safe sleep for their newborns, fighting the mental health crisis facing kids today, and how to make your beloved elders safer in their homes.

[givetoynhh.org/health-news-hub](https://www.givetoynhh.org/health-news-hub)



## CREATIVE GIVING



Luke made it through his cancer treatment like a superhero, with the love of his family and friends. See all the wonderful get well cards on the wall behind him.

# A mother and father raise funds so other kids who get cancer can be as lucky as their Luke

**AT FIRST, JOE AND MELISSA WEREN'T CONCERNED.** It was the week after Christmas, and with all the excitement and treats of the holiday, five-year-old Luke's upset tummy seemed par for the course.

But by dinnertime on New Year's Eve, Luke was in serious pain. Joe and Melissa thought it might be appendicitis, so they took him to the ER, just to be safe.

"At four in the morning after a battery of tests," remembers Joe, "a doctor came in and said Luke's appendix was fine. But there was something else. Luke might have some form of cancer."

From that moment, things moved quickly. Three teams of doctors were summoned, more tests were conducted, and soon Luke was diagnosed with Stage 3 Sporadic Burkitt lymphoma, a rare, fast-growing cancer.

Luke's treatment started immediately. He would need intensive chemotherapy over the next three months.

"It felt like getting hit by a truck," Joe says. "Your whole world is suddenly different."

## How does a child get through intensive cancer treatment?

From the very first medical meeting, Teresa Kristoff and Max Williams were deeply involved in Luke's care. As part of the Child Life team at YNHCH, Teresa and Max help pediatric cancer patients understand and endure what's happening to them using games, toys, and other age-appropriate activities.

Five rounds of chemotherapy, a host of painful side effects, and two full months in the hospital took a heavy toll on Luke and his family.

(continued on back) 



LEFT: Luke celebrated his sixth birthday last April in the hospital with his little sister Lucy. Decorations and toys by the Child Life team!

RIGHT: Luke was SO ready to start first grade this year, after a cancer diagnosis last year derailed kindergarten.

“The side effects were rough,” says Joe. “But the toughest thing for Luke was being isolated and bored.”

That’s where the Child Life team came in.

Teresa (Child Life supervisor) was there every step of the way to explain to Luke what would happen, using cute picture books and stuffed animal “patients.” And each time Luke was admitted to the hospital for another week of chemo, his room sported a “Welcome Luke!” sign and toys or a Super Mario (a favorite Nintendo game) pillow.

Max, the team’s Gaming and Technology Specialist, was always there to make sure Luke was entertained and mentally engaged with interactive video games. “Whenever Luke was with Max,” says Joe, “I felt like I had my regular kid back — playing, happy, and smiling.”

It was a five-month nightmare, but Luke made it through his treatment with flying colors. As of this month, Luke has been cancer-free for nine months.

### How to say thank you

Melissa and Joe are profoundly grateful for the care Luke received at YNHCH — especially from the Child Life team. And they found a meaningful way to show it.

Using the hospital’s super-simple DIY toolkit ([diy.ynhh.org](http://diy.ynhh.org)), Joe set up a personal online fundraising web page to support the Child Life team in their work to help pediatric cancer patients and their families get through the worst time in their lives.

Already, they’ve raised more than \$32,000. “If this can allow Child Life to treat 20, 10 — or even one — kid the way they treated Luke,” says Joe, “it will be so appreciated!” ♥

### You can watch a short video

([givetoynhh.org/max-luke](http://givetoynhh.org/max-luke))

showing Max on a typical day in Child Life. It features Luke playing games with Max while he was in the hospital.



## YOU can make a real difference for patients with your own DIY fundraising webpage

It’s so easy to set up YOUR OWN FUNDRAISER with our online DIY toolkit.

Just choose one of our many funds to support (anything from Child Life to the Breast Cancer Program to YNHCH Dogs in Residence), set a dollar goal, and click the “Create A Fundraising Page” button.

You’ll be up and running in minutes.

“It was so easy to do!” says Luke’s dad, Joe.

“They show you how to share it on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, etc. It’s really great!”

**Learn all about the funds that need your help** and how to set up your own online fundraiser here: [diy.ynhh.org](http://diy.ynhh.org).