



NEWS

Bringing joy to child cancer patients, one jar at a time



Chris Whitaker, right, is among the volunteers lined up along a table to fill Joy Jars on Thursday in Irvine. (Spencer Grant)

BY MATT SZABO | STAFF WRITER

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Jessie Rees was 11 years old when she was diagnosed with terminal cancer in 2011.

She was an outpatient at Children's Hospital of Orange County, but she noticed that many other children weren't quite so fortunate.

“She started coloring on brown paper bags,” said Jessie’s father, Erik Rees. “She wanted to put her Beanie Babies in them and take them to kids that couldn’t leave the hospital.”

Hospital regulations were a bit more stringent than that, though. So the family created Joy Jars, using Jessie’s middle name.





Jessie Rees Foundation co-founder Erik Rees fills a Joy Jar with toys. (Spencer Grant)

These are 64-ounce plastic jars stuffed all the way to the top with new games, toys and activities for children fighting cancer. The Rees family — Erik, Stacey and three children — starting producing them out of the garage of their Rancho Santa Margarita home.

Jessie lost her fight with her Diffuse Intrinsic Pontine Glioma brain tumor on Jan. 5, 2012. But before she died, she was able to stuff more than 3,000 jars with the help of family and friends.

[The Jessie Rees Foundation](#) has continued that work for more than a decade. Erik Rees said more than 450,000 jars have now been produced and sent to kids fighting cancer in all 50 states, as well as 53 countries worldwide.

Every Joy Jar produced by the Irvine-based nonprofit contains age-appropriate goodies as well as some staples — a rubber ducky, a Never Ever Give Up (NEGU) wristband, a beanie (because of the loss of hair) and socks (because hospital rooms are often cold).



A wall sign displays the sentiments of the Jessie Rees Foundation. NEGU stands for Never Ever Give Up. (Spencer Grant)

The foundation partners with hospitals and oncology camps all over the world, as well as the Ronald McDonald House.

The blue wristbands have been worn by professional athletes like NFL quarterbacks Patrick Mahomes and Josh Allen. Seven times, they've been on the cover of Sports Illustrated.

Late NBA star Kobe Bryant was also involved, supporting NEGU and [bringing his Mamba Academy girls basketball team into the “Joy Factory”](#) in late 2018 to stuff 400 Joy Jars.

Rees, a former pastor at Saddleback Church, is appreciative of efforts to bring awareness to the nonprofit. The foundation also recently partnered with NASCAR driver Corey LaJoie, who will be [driving a car with NEGU branding](#).



Grant Frum greets volunteers arriving to fill Joy Jars in Irvine on Thursday. (Spencer Grant)

Rees, who got to spend just more than 10 months with Jessie after her diagnosis, smiles that LaJoie's last name has the word "joy" in it.

"Some days you want to give up just because it's easier," he said. "The pain is so hard, the grief is sometimes engulfing, but we try our best to come alongside these families. Jessie used to always say, 'Daddy, I feel lonely and limited.' And I never would want a kid, no matter what age, to feel lonely or limited. That's just not how a child should feel, so we try to bring some love to them ... These children deserve a boost of love, to feel cared for and loved and not to feel alone."

The Jessie Rees Foundation held an event Saturday at AV Irvine for 48 local families that have children dealing with cancer. Next month is National Childhood Cancer Awareness Month, and the foundation will be holding the NEGU Golf Classic on Sept. 18 at Coto de Caza Golf & Racquet Club.

The foundation has offices in its Irvine space, and a warehouse in the back. Stuffing tens of thousands of Joy Jars each year, though, isn't possible without a bevy of volunteers.





A volunteer fills a Joy Jar with toys. (Spencer Grant)

On Thursday, Irvine-based [financial advisory firm Apriem Advisors](#) visited for a team-building exercise that included the stuffing of Joy Jars.

Apriem Advisors president Rhonda Ducote still remembers the day that Jessie Rees died.

“I live right by Saddleback Church, and that’s when I first heard about NEGU,” she said. “There were a bunch of blue ribbons all over Lake Forest.”

Ducote and the firm started doing team-building events and partnering with NEGU in 2017.

“It’s incredible to see it go to all of these different countries, everybody coming together for not just her memory but the care,” she said. “All of the athletes and stars, it’s remarkable to see. Starting it from his house, to a small office, to the last location to this, I’m always in awe of Erik and Stacey and what they’ve done.”



Foundation co-founder Erik Rees points out a map showing Joy Jar distribution nationwide. (Spencer Grant)

The foundation also has Club NEGU, an 18-month encouragement program, as well as an app called “iNEGU” which drops daily doses of encouragement via video messages from celebrities, professional athletes, Olympians and the Jessie Rees Foundation.

Funds are also being raised to send 17,500 Winter Wonderful jars out this holiday season, to kids unable to go home for the holidays. And more than \$3 million has been dispersed through the Hope for the Holidays program, where families are given \$1,000 checks.

“What started with a jar turns into this relationship,” Erik Rees said. “We just try to use different means, no matter if it’s through a package on a monthly basis or through a daily drop of video encouragement, to keep these kids going and to encourage them to never ever give up.”

Rees said anyone can make a donation or get involved. Each Joy Jar, which is tailored to boys or girls in one of six different age ranges, costs about \$25 to manufacture and ship.

“I’m proud to be Jessie’s dad,” he said, starting to tear up. “I try to make her proud every day, and it’s working. If you follow us on social media, to see a child in a hospital room holding a Joy Jar and smiling, that just brightens my day. That’s another child that we were able to touch the way that Jessie originally wanted it.”



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