

# Supporting Parents Through and Beyond the Cancer Journey



## Kesem Is for Parents, Too

For over two decades, Kesem has supported tens of thousands of families who are navigating a parent or caregiver’s cancer journey.

In fact, we hear every day from parents about the critical role that Kesem has played in helping their path to healing and hope.

Kesem’s impact goes much further than programs and services for children, reaching the parents and caregivers of those children with meaningful support, too. Whether it’s a parent navigating the challenges of a diagnosis and treatment, a spouse who’s trying to maintain normalcy, or a family working through the loss of a parent together, Kesem’s parents and caregivers find community and support that, just like their children, helps them recognize they’re not alone.

Cancer journeys are never easy. From the shock of diagnosis to the disruption and financial strains that come with medical care to learning how to accept help, cancer takes its toll on the mind, body, and spirit. All these things become exponentially more complex when a parent or caregiver is facing a cancer journey because there is no such thing as a break from parenting, not even during a medical crisis.

Few resources exist to help parents and caregivers navigate the unique challenges that come with taking care of children while fighting cancer. This is where Kesem steps in.

As the nation’s leading national nonprofit supporting children facing a parent’s cancer, Kesem’s community consists of more than 5,000 volunteer college student leaders at over 130 college chapters across the country, providing year-round programs and services for children ages 6-18 at no cost to families. Its flagship program, Camp Kesem, is a week-long, sleep-away summer camp.

Beyond camp, Kesem provides a continuum of touchpoints for children and their families. Funded entirely by generous donations from individuals, foundations, and corporations, children can return year after year until the age of 18, free of charge to families.

### KESEM’S POSITIVE IMPACT ON FAMILIES

**98%** of parents said that their children **were positively impacted** after attending a Kesem program.

**96%** of Kesem parents said that participating in Camp Kesem **had a positive impact** on their own mental health.



The Scott Family from Spring, TX. Daughters Promise and Gracie are entering their seventh year with Kesem in 2023.

*“Personally, I think Kesem has impacted me even more than my son. It has 100% given me a passion and a purpose.*

*“We are all in the cancer community and bringing that hope and healing and health and positivity and love, and that sense of not being alone, wherever you are. If you are a caregiver like me or a cancer survivor. Yes, we are not alone.”*



**Eric Livingstone,**  
Kesem Parent

## Insights from the Parent Experience

A Kesem experience uplifts parents as much as their child(ren), brightening the lives of the whole family with positive distractions and a call to focus on what is important in the moment. Though Kesem parents and caregivers don't get to do all the fun camp activities, their relationship with Kesem continues to pay dividends the longer their family stays involved. These long-term gains bring Kesem families back year after year, keeping the community alive.

### How do parents benefit from Kesem?

#### 1. GETTING THEIR KIDS BACK

Kesem delivers a profound shift in the attitude, maturity, confidence, and ease with which a family's child(ren) approaches the world. Often families come to Kesem at the height of trauma, having tried other interventions, none of which made the impact they'd hoped for in revitalizing their children's spirit. Then, after giving Kesem a try, everything changes. Our parents can often be heard saying, "After just a short time with Kesem, I got my child back!"

#### 2. THE POWER OF COMMUNITY

Making plans for the future is hard for families whose lives have been disrupted through a parent or caregiver's cancer diagnosis. Kesem parents find community with familiar faces they see year after year and with the lasting relationships their children make through Kesem. Knowing these great experiences will continue to happen and that this vibrant community will continue to thrive provides a much-needed sense of stability to families rocked by cancer.

Regardless of how parents and caregivers engage with Kesem and how their families are changed through Kesem's programs and services, Kesem parents have one big thing in common beyond a cancer diagnosis: they want to ensure that Kesem will be around for generations to come so that more families can benefit from the healing power of this transformative community.

#### 3. BETTER CONVERSATIONS

Different people communicate differently about their cancer diagnoses. Some talk openly about it; others keep it private. By creating an opportunity for the children of cancer patients to talk about their cancer journeys on their terms when they're ready, Kesem provides an opportunity for families to talk more openly about their experiences at home. We often hear from Kesem parents that their own conversations have become deeper and more honest as a result of their family participating in the Kesem community.

#### 4. FREE EXPERIENCES

Cancer is an expensive, relentless disease that often strains a family's financial resources. By providing all of its programs and services free of charge, Kesem gifts parents with life-changing experiences without adding any financial burden during an already difficult time. Knowing there are thousands of people out there who care enough to donate helps parents feel supported well beyond any financial contributions.

#### 5. A NEW PURPOSE

Kesem's programs and services are designed to help kids reconnect with the joys of childhood in fun, creative ways. This opportunity for fun and silliness often leads to Kesem families becoming filled with energy and focus. Families who were once detached and withdrawn end up learning how to have fun together in a new normal. Families who were once lost or in a fog, become full of purpose. Kesem parents who survive their cancer journeys may lean into new adventures after their kids learned new activities at camp. Widowed parents and caregivers often find energy around giving back to a community that gave them so much.



The McKalpain Family, Kay, Kevin, and Corey, prior to Kevin's passing in March 2020.

## Support Through Grief and Loss

Whether they come to us during a cancer battle or years after a parent or caregiver passes away, those who've lost a spouse or partner to cancer hold a special place in our hearts. They're warriors who endure through and beyond their family's cancer journey, rediscovering life as a single parent along the way.

Two milestones become prominent fixtures in the hearts and minds of these families: The day of receiving a cancer diagnosis and the day that the family loses the parent to cancer. These dates mark significant upheaval for all of the family members and it's often the surviving parent who carries the heaviest load for managing schedules, supporting the children, and attempting to maintain some sense of normalcy.

For Kesem families, there's a third milestone that counterbalances the disruption of the other two: the day they got their first dose of Kesem magic.

Our widowed parents and caregivers often experience this magic in the first phone call with Kesem college student volunteers, which leads them to wonder if this organization may just be what their families need. The magic may also arrive when they pick up their kids after a first camp experience and see a new light in their kids' eyes. Or perhaps the magic comes to life when they connect with the community of other Kesem parents who understand their journey and grief in ways that no one else can.

No matter when they first experience Kesem's magic, these families find healing and hope in the power of the Kesem community.



The Livingstone Family, Jackleen, Eliya, and Eric, prior to Jackleen's passing in March 2016.

## Parent Spotlights



### KAY'S STORY

Three years ago, Kay's 45-year-old husband, Kevin, died after a three-month battle with pancreatic cancer. It was a shock to the system for both her and their, then four-year-old, son Corey. At first Kay didn't know how to control her own feelings and worked with a psychologist to help her and Corey live into this new reality, but there was something missing they didn't even know they needed.

Though Corey was learning to cope with the loss of his father, therapy wasn't able to reconnect him with just being a kid again without the stresses of cancer and loss. That's what they found at Kesem.

For Corey, Kesem is freedom, joy, and something to look forward to every year. For Kay, as a now single mom, it's confirmation she is doing alright. Their Kesem experience has ignited a passion in Kay to support children by sharing the magic of Kesem with others, particularly with other Japanese families.

*"When I picked my son up on the last day [of Camp Kesem], and saw him over there, and thought, 'He's going to cry, he's going to cry. I am not going to cry, but probably he's going to cry.'*

*"Then he found me, and he didn't cry. He was just walking very confidently like a growing man, and he looked like my husband and I just started crying. And he gave me a hug and he said, 'Mommy you don't have to cry, I am here for you.' And I was like, 'it was not my son, it was my husband.'"*

**Kay McKalpain,**  
Newport Beach, CA

## Parent Spotlights *(continued)*



### ERIC'S STORY

In 2016, Eric was holding down three jobs in the service industry and trying to be a good husband, father, and caretaker all while watching the love of his life slip away. Eric lost his wife, Jackleen, to triple negative breast cancer in March of that year and found himself struggling to manage grief while taking on all new roles as a now single parent to their son Eliya, age four at the time.

After reading a scrawled note from one of Eliya's school therapy sessions that read, "I really miss my Mommy, and I really miss my Daddy," Eric was jolted into action by the realization that he needed to reconnect with his son. Acting on a tip that Eliya had heard about a camp for kids whose parent has or had cancer, Eliya attended Kesem and their lives have never been the same since. In fact, Eric's created a unique fundraising initiative called Highway 2 Heal where he rode a 3,500-mile bicycle journey to honor those impacted by cancer while raising awareness and fundraising for Kesem.

*"I want to say thank you to these college students. To these future doctors, moms, dads, politicians, policemen, firemen who are out there practicing empathy and philanthropy, and kindness, and charity. All that stuff, I just want to say thanks."*

**Eric Livingstone,**  
Winnipeg, Manitoba Canada

*"[Sending my son to camp] gave me a chance to breathe. To reflect. I don't show a lot of emotion. That week [of camp], I could just sit around and cry whenever I felt like it. I didn't have to worry about having to be strong. It was good for me. It gave me a week to really ride that emotional rollercoaster that I had been bottling up for so long."*

**Shila Rene Hannah,**  
Leander, TX



### SHILA'S STORY

Shila has a large family with ten children – three her own, three by marriage, and four adopted. In 2020, she lost her husband, Steven, after a four-year battle with rectal adenocarcinoma. During that cancer battle, Shila's daughter, Lauren, who had epilepsy, passed away at age 22. These losses were especially hard on her son William, who was seven years old when his father passed.

The loss of two of the most important adults in William's life left him terrified of being alone, which meant that he wouldn't let Shila out of his sight.

The family tried therapy, counseling, and group support, but nothing seemed to help William until Shila learned about a camp called "Kesem" where William could be around other kids like him. After that first Kesem experience, William flourished. He stayed at Camp Kesem the whole week and never even asked to call home. A month later he went to motorcycle camp on his own and Shila felt she'd gotten her life and her son back.

## In Their Own Words

Click or scan to watch a short video of these Kesem parents describing their experiences.



## Learning to Live Again After Cancer

No matter the outcome, you're never the same after a cancer journey. This is especially true for families who find new ways of living after living through their battles with cancer. We often hear from our parents and caregivers that their cancer experiences rearranged their priorities and reminded them about the importance of relationships, including relationships with their children.

With an emphasis on being a community, Kesem helps these families discover new ways to be together by providing a safe place for kids to reconnect with the joys of childhood and to process the disruptions that come with cancer. When kids come home from a week at camp, their enthusiasm for making new friends, caring for others, and talking about their journey spills over to the rest of the family members, providing parents with the spark needed for living actively in the world.

It's often said that Kesem families are part of Kesem's family for life because Kesem's programs and services continue through the high school years. Additionally, many Kesem participants end up becoming college student volunteers allowing them to stay connected with the Kesem family. Kesem offers this long-term support at no cost to families because we understand the importance of consistency and community in the midst of the stresses of an unknown future.

Even as a parent or caregiver faces the ongoing stress of follow-up care and the possibility of cancer recurrence, Kesem offers support along the way. By helping parents understand that they're not alone, this support instills the confidence for families to try new things, meet new people, and give back to other families who are going through similar situations.



The Thomson Family from Albany, OR. Daughter, Erin, is entering her sixth year with Kesem in 2023.

## Parent Spotlights



### JOLENE'S STORY

At age 40, Jolene was caught off guard with a breast cancer diagnosis. After steadying herself for an aggressive treatment plan to beat the cancer, she was prepared for the physical battle, but wasn't ready for the unique challenges of parenting through a cancer battle. She felt the pain of her then six-year-old daughter, Erin, who was watching her mother's

ordeal as well as the frustration of seeing a lack of resources for a family in her situation. Jolene voiced her concerns with anyone who would listen and one day, gratefully, got pointed in the direction of Kesem.

While hesitant to send her seven-year-old autistic daughter away for a week, Camp Kesem was a significant healing moment for the entire family. Jolene had time to slow down, and Erin was energized by the camp experience. Through Kesem, they have created relationships with a caring community and have learned how to have more open, honest conversations in all aspects of their lives, including cancer.

*"When I reached out to Kesem it was just this great kindness and willingness to help and this whole time it was the one thing I'd been looking for, you know who can help us. Who can see her as an individual instead of just a lesser consequential extension of me, but actually seeing the whole person who is going through her own thing right now and that is what they could do."*

**Jolene Thomson,**  
Albany, OR

## Parent Spotlights *(continued)*



### TERESA'S STORY

Following a holistic treatment approach absent of chemotherapy, Teresa defied her 1% chance of survival of endometrial cancer and is in sustained remission seven years after diagnosis. Though she kept the severity of her diagnosis tightly within her family, she joined a Facebook-based support group, which led to seeing an advertisement for Camp Kesem, a camp for the children of cancer warriors.

Following her curiosity, Teresa sent her daughters to camp where they thrived before returning home with a thrill-seeking spirit that continues to inspire the whole family. Teresa says her battle with cancer taught her not to take life for granted and to slow down and appreciate family. Kesem has given her family a new way to talk about cancer, new ways to bond, a love of adventure, and gratitude for one another.

*"The benefit of being able financially to say, this will not be a burden for your family. This will be a time of joy for your family, this will be a time of feeling normal, this will be an adventure that they won't forget, this will be a time of building lifelong lasting relationships and friendships. Kesem is a gift. I can't thank you enough for that gift."*

**Teresa Scott,**  
Spring, TX

*"[My son] mentioned that when they were doing a campfire and sharing stories, a lot of kids mentioned that their friends at school often say things, not to make them angry, but just not knowing what to say. They want to say something to help them, but don't know what to say. I think that is just because it is so hard to understand this journey unless you walk the same path."*

**Audrey Yang,**  
New York, NY



### AUDREY'S STORY

Several years before her breast cancer diagnosis, Audrey decided to take a hiatus from her busy career and focus on spending time with her son Jack, while he was still young. Among many adventures was a decision to live in Barcelona, Spain, for a year. Sadly, their plans were derailed by an unusually serious phone call with her doctor who told her that she had cancer. Audrey's biggest

concern was how the diagnosis would affect her son and what impact cancer would have on her ability to be a good parent.

Audrey first learned of Kesem through a support group. When she mentioned the opportunity to Jack, he was thrilled at the idea of getting to be with other kids who understood what he'd been going through. Jack had a positive experience at camp and made lots of valued friendships. Audrey says that the most important message that these kids learn at camp is that they can all lean on each other and that they learn to both give and receive support. Kesem has enabled and empowered Audrey and Jack to be more open about discussing cancer and other sensitive topics as well as helped them share her survivor story, for which she is grateful.

## In Their Own Words

Click or scan to watch a short video of these Kesem parents describing their experiences.



## Support Our Work

Kesem's programs are free for all children and teens impacted by a parent's cancer. And our college student leaders give their time to run our year-round programs, including our flagship program, Camp Kesem.

To support our work and enable Kesem to serve even more families in the years ahead, donate online at [www.kesem.org/donatenow](http://www.kesem.org/donatenow).

To learn more about Kesem and even discuss how we can share the learnings, don't hesitate to message us at [magic@kesem.org](mailto:magic@kesem.org).

## Ways to Give

You can create meaningful moments for children and parents who are in need of support as their family grapples with the challenges posed by a parent's cancer diagnosis.

Make a **Donation**

Attend or **Sponsor an Event**

Donate to **College Student Leaders**

**Fundraise**

Ask Your Company about Sponsoring a **Matching Gift**

**Shop Our Store**

Join **Team Kesem** to Fundraise Through a Local Event

Create a **Corporate Grant** or **Alliance**



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Kesem, a 501(c)(3) organization, is a diverse community led by passionate and empathetic college students that supports children through and beyond their parent's cancer. By offering free, creative, fun-filled programs that foster a lasting community, Kesem aims to ensure that every child impacted by a parent's cancer is never alone.

For more information, visit [kesem.org](http://kesem.org).