

'Together We Are Stronger'

A VFW Post in Vermont rallied an entire community to raise funds for a family whose 2-year-old daughter was diagnosed with a rare form of bladder cancer

Mar 17, 2023

In a tightknit community like that of Bennington, Vermont, whispers of heartache tend to grow into a rallying cry strong enough to summon all residents from downtown to its outskirts.

When these whispers about 2-year-old Finley Scanlon spread across town in early spring of 2022, it prompted VFW Post 1332 members to lead a fundraising effort alongside other local organizations to raise more than \$56,000 by July 15.

“I have two daughters and granddaughters, and nobody wants to hear that their child has cancer,” Post 1332 Commander Norm LeBlanc said. “I’ve been fortunate to not have that happen to me, but sometimes you just have to pay it forward.”

Scanlon had been diagnosed with a rare form of bladder cancer, prompting her mother to take a leave of absence as an elementary school teacher and her father to make up the financial shortfall by taking on extra shifts at work. With daycare an improbable option as chemo and radiation could tear down the body’s defenses against all kinds of infections, including COVID, the family sought help from a community well-prepared for the fight.

The first to hear of it was Norshaft Lions Club President Matt Gras, whose first call was to LeBlanc at Post 1332 based on the Post commander’s reputation to take charge and execute a plan of attack.

Together, the Post and Lions Club members dubbed their efforts under a unifying banner of “Together We Are Stronger,” reaching out to other local organizations that included the Cancer Crusaders, Eagles, Elks, Rotary Club and American Legion Post 13.

“We started knocking on club doors, showing up to their private meetings to talk about what

NATIONAL HEADQUARTERS

406 W. 34th Street
Kansas City, MO 64111
Office 816.756.3390
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WASHINGTON OFFICE

200 Maryland Ave., N.E.
Washington, D.C. 20002
Office 202.543.2239
Fax 202.543.6719

info@vfw.org
www.vfw.org

this young family was about to endure,” said LeBlanc, who retired in 2012 from the Navy as a senior chief following a 24-year career. “Each meeting went well. They all wanted to help.”

With VFW and American Legion Auxiliary groups and Riders of the VFW and Legion also joining the cause, LeBlanc then proposed a combined fundraising effort that scoured Bennington for donations.

Under LeBlanc’s leadership, the clubs and organizations each united in helping host a spaghetti dinner and several raffle events, which later prompted a Post 1332 member, Tim Jones, owner of Eagle Hose Auto in Bennington, to start the “Rev Up” challenge. All local dealerships soon began donating more than \$500 each, and it eventually snowballed into everyone with a motor in a car or lawnmower to donate as well.

But LeBlanc was not done brainstorming. He then sacrificed his beloved gray beard, which he had not cut in more than a decade since retiring from the military.

“I didn’t want to cut my beard, but it was a challenge and we always try to just shoot for the moon,” LeBlanc said. “I think the noblest gestures in the world require sacrifice. If you can stand at the front of the line and lead by example, it motivates people to do the same.”

On July 15 at the event, LeBlanc, true to his word, sat in the barber’s chair and by 8:30 p.m. raised an additional \$5,000 from neighbors and residents delighted to see how far the former Navy senior chief was willing to go.

The clean-shaven LeBlanc joined the others for the rest of the night, each effort and challenge helping raise a combined \$56,000, which representatives of each club and organization then together presented in the form of a check to the Scanlons.

“It was special to see how extremely grateful and humbled the family was,” LeBlanc said. “They were also able to see the faces and meet the people who worked so tirelessly to bring this together. It was a fitting example of what can be accomplished when we work together.”

This article is featured in the 2023 February issue of [VFW magazine](#) and was written by [Ismael Rodriguez Jr.](#), senior writer for VFW magazine.