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Parents of Invention: Cookies for Kids' Cancer

Two parents launch a [bake-sale campaign](#), to fight children's cancer—and to help their own son beat it.

By Jennifer Tung

In the nearly two years since she learned that her son, Liam, had stage-four neuroblastoma, or cancer of the nervous system, Gretchen Holt has had just one major breakdown. It came right after she received the diagnosis in February 2006; Liam was 2 1/2. "I crumpled on the floor, and that's the only time I've really lost it," she says. Moments later she called her husband, Larry Witt, who was at home with the couple's younger daughter, Ella, then 1. He immediately began researching treatment options, and within hours Holt and her son were in an ambulance, heading from New Jersey to Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in Manhattan.



During the first few months of Liam's treatment (which included an 11-hour surgery, five rounds of chemotherapy, and radiation), Holt and Witt learned a staggering fact about pediatric cancer. It's the number-one disease killer of children, yet the funds the National Cancer Institute directs to research all 12 kinds of pediatric cancer combined are a fraction of what goes to study each individual adult cancer. "It's reprehensible," Holt says. "I'm not saying our disease is more important than others, but throw us a bone—or at least try to treat it equally." They also learned that Memorial Sloan-Kettering needed \$2 million to fund the development of a new, more advanced treatment for neuroblastoma.

"We said, 'Two million? That's it? That's the difference between a more effective treatment for our son and not?'" says Witt, who, like his wife, holds a senior-level marketing job at kitchenware company Oxo International. After months of feeling helpless, the couple suddenly realized they could take action.

Just as quickly, Holt came up with the idea of a large-scale bake sale to raise the money. "The holidays were coming up, and I said, 'Let's bake cookies,'" she recalls. "'Who doesn't love a cookie?'" With the help of a bakery in Boston and around 250 volunteers, the couple raised more than \$400,000 toward the \$2 million goal. (The new treatment is now in development.)

That initial push garnered so much interest from people wanting to throw more bake sales that Witt and Holt founded [Cookies for Kids' Cancer](#). Participants hold local sales and send the profits to the charity, which then directs them to pediatric-cancer centers nationwide.

With full-time jobs and two kids in preschool (Liam just completed another round of treatment after a relapse and is doing well), there's barely time for them to breathe. But the couple, who spend the work week with their children in Manhattan and weekends in New Jersey, don't waste a second. "We're constantly hugging and kissing our kids and trying to celebrate the moment," Holt says. Adds Witt: "Some couples [going through this] take the pain out on each other. We've been able to take our frustration and anger and focus them in a good direction. We're both competitive. We aren't going to let cancer take everything from us."



Larry Witt, Gretchen Holt, and their children, Liam and Ella, at apple seeds, a play space near their New York City apartment.