Luca is a typical 17-month-old boy. According to his mom, Marlana, he loves to play in water, wrestle with his older sister, Mika, and play ball. He also likes to eat anything covered in yogurt — and to make a mess, destroying just about anything he can get his hands on! What’s not typical about Luca is that he was born with Down syndrome; then, about six months ago, diagnosed with AML, a more severe type of acute leukemia. This has presented a lot of challenges and adjustments for the family.

Luca’s treatments have been in-patient, with each round lasting a month or more. This intense schedule has been disruptive for the family. “After the first few months, we began to adjust and found a new normal,” Marlana shared. “One of our goals was to keep things consistent for Mika, including staying in daycare. But it got hard. I had to leave my job to care for Luca full time. My husband, Justin, continued to work, but our financial obligations started to pile up.”

That’s when she learned about Friends of Karen. “I reached out to a friend who has been on this journey and she suggested I contact them. They were amazing; willing to jump right in. Being in the hospital 24/7 for months at a time is draining, so it was always nice when Beth, our Friends of Karen social worker, visited. It’s such a relief to talk with her. They also provided little gifts for Luca to keep him busy during chemo and transfusions.”

Friends of Karen has provided financial assistance to help with living expenses and traveling costs to the hospital, plus sibling support for three-year-old Mika, to help her understand her brother’s illness, deal with the dramatic changes in her family life, and learn coping techniques. “They helped us continue to be a family, by taking some of the everyday pressure off,” Marlana said. “We really wanted to be able to keep our house — and they helped us do that. They provided assistance to help keep Mika in daycare. And they were able to provide art therapy for her, which has been so helpful. We noticed she was starting to not want to go see Luca. The art therapy helped her understand that the hospital is not such a scary place after all. She loves it!”

Luca will be spending much of his summer recovering from treatments, but Mom says that nothing can hold him down. “He has been fighting since the day he was born,” Marlana said, proudly, “and he keeps on fighting through all his treatments. Right now he’s in remission, but it’s been a rough road to get here. He’s been extremely sick through his treatments, but you would never know if you met him! He’s so spunky and full of life.”

As Marlana reflects on Luca’s experience and her family’s journey, she comes back to the role Friends of Karen has played. “This has not been easy, but Friends of Karen gave us so much hope when we were feeling hopeless. When we first received Luca’s diagnosis, we felt like we were thrown into a tornado of uncertainty. It was so hard to just focus on Luca and his recovery. Friends of Karen stepped in and helped lift the clouds of doubt, to give us the clarity we needed to focus on our family. Words cannot express our gratitude!”

“They helped us continue to be a family, by taking some of the everyday pressure off”

– Luca’s mom
Our Mission: To provide emotional, financial, and advocacy support for children with life-threatening illnesses and their families, in order to help keep them stable, functioning, and able to cope.

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Sheila Petersen (1938-1990)

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Your Commitment and Kindness gives a Family Hope

When I tell people that Friends of Karen is celebrating 40 years of service they are impressed. Forty years is a long time and signals that we must be doing something right. What started as Sheila Petersen and caring neighbors helping Karen’s family in 1978, today has become a top-notch organization offering a lifeline of services, provided at no cost, to more than 600 families annually.

Much has changed in four decades, but the need for community support to sustain Friends of Karen hasn’t.

Each year we face the challenge of raising our entire annual budget, which this year is just over $4 million. This means that we make a promise to critically-ill children and their families that we will sustain them at a time when they are feeling personally vulnerable, incredibly stressed and beyond worried. We do this knowing that we can count on you to be our partners in providing the help they need. Yes, this is a huge leap of faith, but in 40 years, you’ve never let us down.

Not for one minute am I or any of the Friends of Karen team members not grateful to you for walking this difficult journey alongside our families. Your commitment and kindness gives a family hope knowing that they are not alone, but part of a larger community that cares. You help relieve a parent’s anxiety about paying their rent, feeding their children, getting their ill child to treatment, and knowing what to do and how to plan for their child’s often long and heart-wrenching illness. You help healthy brothers and sisters gain coping skills to deal with the enormous upheaval in their lives. Together, we save families. That’s the ultimate bottom line.

In this, Friends of Karen’s 40th year, please help us fulfill our promise. In this newsletter, there is information about several opportunities for you to show your support. We are excited about our new brick campaign (page 7) and our 40th Anniversary Celebration in November (back page). I welcome the chance to speak with you about your special interests and where you can have the greatest impact with your charitable giving. Read Luca’s story (cover page) and you’ll understand that for our Friends of Karen children and families, every dollar really matters.

Because of you, Friends of Karen has assisted 15,482 children since 1978. Together, we’ll guarantee that every Tri-State area family caring for a child with a life-threatening illness will have Friends of Karen’s support and never have to face their child’s illness alone.

With gratitude,

Judith R. Factor, Executive Director

Your Support Makes a Difference One Child and Family at a Time

Friends of Karen is a registered 501(c)(3) charity established in 1978. All contributions are tax-deductible.
This May, Fran Rothstein participated in her 11th consecutive Walk/Run for Friends of Karen. Like every year, she had a photo of her late son, Eric, attached to her vest. And like every year, Fran finished near the end — which is just fine with her.

“It's not a question of winning,” Fran said, laughing. “I walk to raise money and awareness for Friends of Karen, because I will always be so grateful for everything they’ve done for me and for others.”

Eric was diagnosed in February 2007 with acute myeloid leukemia, shortly following his 19th birthday. “When I found out about Friends of Karen, I was amazed. They are so welcoming and supportive. They paid for so many expenses. And Marla, our social worker, was very special.”

By August, after many treatments, blood transfusions, and a bone marrow transplant, Eric died. “Eric is my hero,” Fran reflected. “I remember telling him, ‘I would take this away from you in a heartbeat if I could.’ He looked at me and said, ‘Mom, I wouldn’t want you to.’ He was so brave. And he always had a wise-guy sense of humor. He wanted a bench dedicated to him in Central Park that said, “Here lies Eric Rothstein.” Well, that bench is now at Central Park West and 96th Street, and reads: “Eric L. Rothstein, Dec. 2, 1987-Aug. 6, 2007. Sit here and smile. Love Mom, Dad, Family and Friends.” I love this tribute and hope he does, too!”

As for the Walk, Fran says, “I will do this as long as they have it — even if someone has to push me across the finish line in my wheelchair! It means that much to me. Friends of Karen is my passion in life.”

Sharon Weiner has been one of our most faithful and longstanding volunteers, for over three decades! We’re so welcoming and supportive. They paid for so many expenses. And Marla, our social worker, was very special.”

Knowing I was involved with tennis, they asked me to chair a Friends of Karen event at the Citibank Champions Tennis Tournament. I did that for five years. Then I started on the gala committee, which I’ve chaired or been involved with for at least 20 years. About ten years ago, I was asked to be on the board.”

Sharon’s family has also been involved with Friends of Karen. “It’s our family charity!” she said. “My three kids and my father have all volunteered. And my husband, Jonas, has been so supportive. He loves the organization, too. Through his business, Best Plumbing Tile & Stone, he’s sponsored events and helped store items in his warehouse that they don’t have space for in their office.”

Sharon has also remembered Friends of Karen in her estate plans, as a member of our Sheila Petersen Legacy of Giving Circle, which helps ensure the organization’s future. What keeps her so motivated and passionate about the organization all these years?

“Every time I meet a family and hear what they’ve gone through, it’s a reminder of how much we can make a difference to help them get through such a terrible time. Friends of Karen social workers are like guardian angels. They take away a lot of the worries, so the family can concentrate on taking care of their children. It’s such a worthy charity.”

Sheila Petersen Legacy of Giving Circle
Naming Friends of Karen in your estate plans will continue to impact the lives of critically-ill children and their families well into the future. Consider including a bequest in your will or trust. Visit our website for more information or contact JudithFactor@FriendsofKaren.org.
Friends of Karen 40th Birthday Party at Rye Playland was a great event gathering supporters and families together for an evening of fun and festivities.

New Fairfield Girl Scout troop #50866 and their leader Maryellen Wiebke deliver 140 boxes of Girl Scout cookies. Our social workers bring them to families when they make hospital or home visits. What a treat!

Mt. Sinai High School Varsity basketball players hosted a basketball clinic to raise awareness and funds for Friends of Karen, pictured here with a donation check.

The Long Island Masquerade Gala celebrated and honored corporate partners, Richard and Mary Bhullar of Worldnet International, and Friends of Karen family, The Andersons, who received the Humanitarian Award.

Somers Women’s Club volunteers help pack Back-to-School supplies and provide support for the program. Over 850 children will receive backpacks and supplies from Friends of Karen for school in September.

Would you like to hold a local fundraising event? Contact Gwen Salmo at GwenSalmo@FriendsofKaren.org or (914) 617-4051. On Long Island, please contact Rebecca Mowl at RebeccaMowl@FriendsofKaren.org or (631) 473-1768.
Where Are They Now?
James, 20 Years Later

As Friends of Karen celebrates its 40th anniversary this year, it’s heartwarming and inspiring to look back and catch up with some families and children we’ve worked with over the years.

Twenty years ago, we first met James and his family. James was just 16 years old in January 1998 when he was diagnosed with Hodgkin’s lymphoma. An ENT doctor discovered some swollen lymph nodes after James had been experiencing a coughing issue for over a month. After his diagnosis, he underwent aggressive treatment that included chemotherapy and radiation for about 5-and-a-half months.

“It was definitely a shock when I got my diagnosis,” James recalled. “We had no history of this in my family. Through it all, I have to say, my dad was a candidate for sainthood! He was with me the entire time.”

James had a relapse in April 2000, after being off treatment for 21 months. “When we look back, my dad is struck by how we got through all of this during my senior year of high school, in the middle of planning things like college visits and senior prom! I was very aware during that time in my life that my dad was being supported by Friends of Karen. The support they gave him made a huge difference in how he was able to be with me.”

A social worker at Mount Sinai Hospital introduced James’ father to Friends of Karen. After contacting the organization, he began working with Rhonda, one of our social workers. “Rhonda was such a huge support for him emotionally,” James shared. “And the organization also provided vital financial support for us. There were so many expenses they reimbursed us for — dealing with insurance companies, paying bills and household expenses, travel back and forth to the hospital. I can’t imagine how we would have made it through without them.”

Today, we’re happy to report that James is a healthy 36-year-old man, happily married, and working as a radiologic technologist. He’s also returning to school to become a radiation therapist. “I’ve been fortunate that I’ve done so well,” he reflected. “I go once a year for my annual physical and that’s it. I’ve also been able to be a part of Sloan Kettering’s adult survivorship program.” The years have not diminished James’ appreciation or enthusiasm for Friends of Karen at all. “Looking back on my experience, it’s incredible,” he said. “When you’re a child, or an adolescent like I was at the time, going through something so traumatic, it’s near impossible to see beyond your own battle; to have empathy or be able to identify with the rest of your family, who are going through their own battle. That’s why I appreciate Friends of Karen so much. They are there to care for the caregivers. They are the most important support system any family could have working behind the scenes in such a difficult time.”
Yakira (Kiki) was only eight years old when her brother, Yahwanathan, was diagnosed with osteosarcoma at the age of 12. Ten years later, she vividly remembers the impact Friends of Karen had on her family during those difficult times and following Yahwanathan’s death.

“We needed support so we could be a support for my brother,” Yakira shared. “Friends of Karen provided that for us. I will never forget how caring and helpful they were to my mother and me.”

Selina, Yakira’s mother, recalled how they first connected with Friends of Karen. “A hospital social worker told us about them. All I can say is, they were sent from heaven. They came at just the right time, took care of us, and became part of our family. They were with us emotionally, helping us every step of the way. And financially, we would not have made it without them. They took care of every bill we had. I’ll never forget how they looked me in the eyes and said, ‘Selina, this is why we are here. You will not be stressed about any of these things. The only concern you need to have is your son and Kiki.’ I was afraid Kiki was not going to visit her brother after the amputation and I was not sure how to make that easier for my daughter. With the professional guidance from Friends of Karen, the uncertainty was lifted and she began to visit Yahwanathan without fear.”

“My brother had to have his leg amputated,” Yakira (Kiki) continued, “and I didn’t think I could go see him. But he was always so wonderful. He pleaded with my mom to bring me, because he missed me dearly. Friends of Karen helped me to understand that this is my brother, even without his leg! My social workers, Rebecca and Melinda, made me feel like I was cared for. They helped me to not be overwhelmed by this tremendous tragedy; I was able to remain youthful.”

Yakira is now 17, getting ready to graduate from high school, and preparing for college. “I just want to get my diploma!” she said, laughing. Over the years, she has been involved in community service projects, served in her church, and sang in the choir. She also took part in the Legal Outreach program starting in eighth grade and throughout high school, which helped her develop skills, prepare for college, and intern at law firms. It even provided her with a college scholarship based on her senior research paper. Her future looks bright and, like her mom, she looks back on their journey with gratitude and tears. “We miss Yahwanathan every day. But we are so grateful for the help and caring support we received from Friends of Karen. It’s an amazing program.”

“I have so many special memories I can’t even count them,” Selina added. “First, about my son. Let me tell you, this boy loved life! He is so compassionate — and I say is because I believe he’s still with us — always so loving of everybody and everything. And that’s how Friends of Karen is. They make you feel like both you and your children are so important; and that you matter. They understand what you’re going through and they have so much love in their hearts. I pray that more and more families find out about this organization and that Friends of Karen lives forever, for the benefit of the world!”

A grant from the Tom Coughlin Jay Fund helps us cover emergency household expenses for some of our NYC families. The mission of the Tom Coughlin Jay Fund is to help families tackle childhood cancer by providing financial, emotional and practical support. www.tcjayfund.org

Thank you, Jay Fund!

“A Sister Remembers: Yakira’s Journey

Yakira (Kiki) and her mom, Selina.

“They came at just the right time, took care of us, and became part of our family.”
SAVE THE DATES!

Crabtree Kittle House Sparkle for a Cause Fundraiser
July 24, Chappaqua, NY

14th Annual “Journey of the Heart” Bike Tour
September 22-23, Litchfield County, CT

Walk/Run for Friends of Karen at the Hamptons Marathon
September 29, Southampton, NY

9th Annual Benefit — 5K Walk for The Adina’s Angels Fund
October 7, Rockland Lake Park, Congers, NY

Mamma Rosa’s Italian Dinner Party
October 15, Mamma Rosa Ristorante, Somers, NY

40th Anniversary Celebration
November 2, Chelsea Piers, New York, NY

For more information about these and other upcoming events, please visit our website at www.FriendsofKaren.org/events

Building Compassion and Hope One Brick at a Time

Join Friends of Karen in creating a pathway of loving messages from all of our supporters and families.

In celebration of our 40th anniversary, Friends of Karen is building a pathway of compassion and hope one brick at a time to ensure that no family faces their child’s illness alone. We invite you to participate in this inaugural fundraising opportunity.

A brick contribution is a great way to recognize milestones and achievements for yourself or a loved one. Make your story part of our history. Celebrate a special occasion, birthday, anniversary, graduation or honor or remember someone special.

The bricks are engraved with your personal message and will be placed in a pathway outside Friends of Karen headquarters in North Salem, New York.

The bricks are available in two sizes.
- 4” x 8” brick for a $250 contribution
- 8” x 8” brick for a $1,000 contribution

You’ll receive a small replica keepsake brick with the same message.

To purchase a brick, visit FriendsofKaren.org for more information or email GabriellaDiSisto@FriendsofKaren.org or call 914-617-4047.

More Ways to Help

BACK TO SCHOOL
Help our children and their siblings start the school year with new backpacks and school supplies, a list can be found on our website.

HOLIDAY ADOPT-A-FAMILY PROGRAM
You will be matched with a Friends of Karen child or children and can purchase one or more items on their wish list. What better way to celebrate the holidays than by putting a smile on the face of an ill child or sibling? Visit our website or contact DeniseTredwell@FriendsofKaren.org or call 914-617-4052.

HELP FEED OUR FAMILIES!
Help parents provide healthy regular meals for their family. Gift cards in the amounts of $25, $50, $100 are much needed from American Express, Visa, Mastercard, Shoprite, Key Food, Stop & Shop, Fairway, Trader Joe’s, Walmart and Target. You can mail to Friends of Karen 118 Titicus Rd. North Salem, NY 10560 or 21 Perry Street, Port Jefferson, NY 11777.
“When our 2-year-old son was diagnosed with leukemia, Friends of Karen reached out a helping hand to pull us up when we felt we were falling off a cliff, with understanding, guidance, and emotional support.”

— John’s Mom

Approximately 85% of Friends of Karen children have been diagnosed with some form of cancer.

September is Childhood Cancer Awareness Month. “With awareness comes hope. Help us spread the word!”

#AlwaysGold

Follow us on:

Text “FRIENDSOFKAREN” to 22828 to join our email list!

40th Anniversary Celebration
Friday, November 2, 2018 at 6:30 pm
Chelsea Piers, New York City

Celebrate four decades of bringing help, hope and support to over 15,000 children and their families.

Honoring

- Sharon and Jonas Weiner
  Philanthropists and Leaders
- Steve Tenedios, Café Metro/fresh&co
  Humanitarian and Champion
- Rhonda Ryan, LMSW
  Social Worker Extraordinaire

For more information and to reserve your tickets, please visit FriendsofKaren.org or call 914-617-4051