



Sharing Gratitude: Camila's Family



Camila

Camila is an 11-year-old currently undergoing treatment for an epithelial tumor, a form of cancer that develops in the tissue lining the body's organs, internal passageways, and skin. She was diagnosed at age nine, and since then her family has been supported by Friends of Karen social worker Natalia. Recently, her parents, Norma and Luis, shared their deep gratitude for the care their family—including Camila's 16-year-old brother, Christopher—has received.

Because Norma has been unable to work while caring for Camila, the family has relied on financial assistance to help

cover essential expenses such as a portion of their rent, electricity, food, clothing, and shoes. Just as important, Natalia has provided steady, compassionate guidance to help Camila's parents cope with the overwhelming fear, grief, and uncertainty that accompany a child's serious illness. She has also offered education about the diagnosis, treatment plan, and what to expect during the most challenging moments.

Through this combination of practical support and emotional care, Friends of Karen has helped Camila's family stay grounded, informed, and supported throughout their journey.

"These words are born from the deepest part of our hearts.

In one of the most difficult moments of our lives, Natalia and Friends of Karen have been an immense source of support for our family. Your closeness, your sincere concern, and your generous help gave us strength when we needed it most.

Thanks to you, we never felt alone.

Camila, our daughter, is a little girl full of tenderness and courage that inspires us every day. Despite everything she has faced, she continues to smile

Camila's self-portrait while losing her hair due to chemotherapy

and teaches us the true meaning of hope.

Thank you for your sensitivity, your time, and the care with which you accompanied us along this very difficult journey. We will never forget what you have done for Camila and for us.

With all our gratitude and affection."

- Camila's Mom and Dad



Inside: Meet Friends of Karen's New Executive Director



friendsofkaren.org

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.

Founder

Sheila Petersen (1938-1990)

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Friends of Karen is a registered 501 (c) (3) charity established in 1978. All contributions are tax-deductible.

Longtime ED Judith Factor Retires



Judith Factor retired on March 31, 2026, after 18 years as Friends of Karen’s Executive Director. Her impact on Friends of Karen’s work and growth has been significant.

“Having served on the Board of Friends of Karen for over two decades, I’ve had the privilege of working closely with Judy throughout her long tenure as Executive Director,” Friends of Karen Board Secretary Pam Hervey said. “Judy brought a rare combination of compassion, commitment, and vision to the organization. Under her leadership, Friends of Karen grew thoughtfully and sustainably, expanding and strengthening programs while remaining firmly rooted in our mission and core values. She’s been a trusted partner, focused on the immediate needs of the families and children we support, as well as the long-term health of the organization. Judy never lost sight of the passion that drives the organization and the families at the heart of the work. Friends of Karen is stronger because of her leadership.”

“It has been my greatest honor to lead Friends of Karen these many years,” reflects Judy. “I am grateful to the children and their families who have inspired me every day by their courage, strength and resilience. Working alongside our talented staff who live Friends of Karen’s mission and our dedicated Board of Directors has been a joy. A huge thank you to all those who support our work. You make it all possible. I plan to stay involved in an appropriate way and will cheer on Stefanie and our team as they move Friends of Karen forward.”

Celebrating Our Volunteers

As we celebrate April as National Volunteer Month, we extend our heartfelt gratitude to our community volunteers, groups, students, and corporate partners who generously give their time and talents every day to support Friends of Karen families.



Volunteers Needed

Friends of Karen is gearing up for our Back-to-School program, which begins in June to ensure the critically ill children and their siblings receive new backpacks filled with all the supplies they need to feel cared for, confident, and ready to begin the school year. We rely on the dedication of our volunteers and corporate partners to make this program a success through supply drives, packing events, and collaborative partnerships.

To explore more volunteer opportunities or learn how you can support this year’s Back-to-School program, visit our website www.friendsofkaren.org or contact volunteer coordinator Allison Watson at (914) 617-4054 or Lexi Latino in our Long Island office at (631) 473-1768.

GIFT CARDS NEEDED

Our families struggle to keep food on the table. \$50 gift cards to ShopRite, Stop & Shop, Target, or Walmart make the biggest impact. Visit friendsofkaren.org or scan the QR code here to donate now.



A New Chapter:

Welcoming Executive Director Stefanie Ortiz-Cidlik

On February 2, 2026, Friends of Karen proudly welcomed Stefanie Ortiz-Cidlik as our new Executive Director. Stefanie joins us with over 20 years of dedicated non-profit leadership, marked by a deep commitment to mission-driven work.

Most recently, Stefanie served as CEO/Executive Director of iEARN-USA (International Education and Resource Network), a nonprofit leader in global collaborative education for K-12 students, engaging US students with their peers around the world through virtual exchange and study abroad programs. Her extensive background also includes leading international operations for the Girl Scouts as Chief Executive of USA Girl Scouts Overseas, where she championed programming for girls in

90 countries. Earlier in her career, she dedicated several years to the vital field of alcohol, tobacco, and drug abuse prevention.

“Stefanie has all the talents required to be a successful leader,” Friends of Karen Board President Dr. Gina Lodolini said. “She brings a proven track record in fundraising, team management, and strategic communications. Most importantly, Stefanie truly understands the heart of our mission and the needs of the families we serve.”

“Joining the Friends of Karen team is a profound privilege,” Stefanie shared. “Having the opportunity to stand by families and their children during their most difficult journeys is a mission that



Stefanie Ortiz-Cidlik

resonates deeply with me. I am inspired by the dedication of our staff and board, and I look forward to ensuring every family we serve feels the full weight of our support.”

Staying Afloat Despite Feeling Overwhelmed: Adhya’s Story



Adhya

Adhya was just five years old when she was diagnosed with Acute Promyelocytic Leukemia, a rare and aggressive blood cancer. The news in 2025 changed everything for her parents, Ashish and Pritiba.

“I was worried that we would lose our home and our life as we knew it,” Ashish recalled. “I wondered if I would lose myself in the process and my ability to be there for my family.”

To help the family navigate the overwhelming uncertainty, Friends of Karen paired them with social worker Melissa. Because Adhya had never even been sick with the flu before her diagnosis, much of Melissa’s early work focused on emotional support—helping the family process fear, grief, and the shock of such a sudden change. She also guided them through understanding Adhya’s illness, the treatment plan, and the wide range of emotional reactions that can surface during a child’s medical crisis.

Friends of Karen provided financial assistance as well, helping the family cover their mortgage, food, and other

essential household expenses. Melissa also advocated for them and connected them with additional community resources to ease the strain.

“Friends of Karen helped us understand what to expect during treatment and normalized the ups and downs of having a sick child,” Ashish shared. “They helped us stay afloat so we could focus on our daughter’s health. I have the utmost gratitude for Friends of Karen and for the emotional support Melissa gave us—they are angels sent by the gods to families like mine.”

Today, Adhya is six years old and has completed treatment; a milestone her family celebrates with deep appreciation for the support that helped carry them through.

Did you know? Every family we serve is paired with a Friends of Karen social worker who is by their side during their child’s illness journey.



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Sails of Hope by Shania - From a Friends of Karen Sibling Support session, Shania shared that her painting illustrated that after being stagnant in the water, the sails are finally filled with hope again.

When you have finished reading this newsletter, please share it with a friend.

Save The Dates!



Ways You Can Help

Tax-Smart Giving

Make a strategic impact through:

- Donor-Advised Fund contributions
- Qualified Charitable Distributions (IRA)
- Gifts of appreciated stock

More Ways to Make a Difference

- Join our **Guardian of Hope** monthly donor community
- Honor someone special with a **tribute or memorial gift**
- Designate Friends of Karen in your company's **matching gift** program
- Participate in your **workplace giving** campaign
- Attend a Friends of Karen event
- Volunteer your time to support our families

For more information, visit our website at [friendsforkaren.org](https://www.friendsforkaren.org)

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