

## **Ladybugs Swarm New Jersey!**

by Katrina Rossos

With the holiday season upon us, many people feel inspired to open their hearts and pocketbooks and give back to their community. “The Real Housewives of New Jersey” star Dina Manzo has always felt compelled to be philanthropic, no matter what the time of year. Manzo’s benevolence is evident in Project Ladybug, a charitable organization she founded in 2006, which raises money to help better the lives of the pediatric cancer patients and their families. She chose to become a part of “The Real Housewives of New Jersey” as a means to promote her charity. The national publicity caused Project Ladybug’s funds and participants to skyrocket, and the foundation has just recently achieved its official 501(c)3 nonprofit status.

Currently, the foundation is closely affiliated with St. Joseph’s Children’s Hospital in Paterson, NJ, a local hospital with extensive plans for the future. Not only are they well-known for their Oncology department, but they have one of the only three Feeding and Swallowing Centers in the country which focuses on pediatric disorders. As the hospital expands and the demand for patient care grows, Manzo’s goal is to build Ladybug Houses where she says “the kids can stay and their families can stay and be comfortable while they are getting treatment. Kind of like a Ronald McDonald idea, but a little bit more whimsical and fun.”

Q: What inspired you to start a charitable organization?

A: Well, I’ve always given back. My parents taught me that at a very young age. So, as an adult I’ve always given to St. Jude. And being an event planner, and my husband having the banquet facility, it was just natural that I do something more. It was one day that I received a mailing from St. Jude, because I often would send them checks, and it was a picture with a little girl who was suffering from leukemia. The picture looked just like my daughter so it really hit home how fortunate I am to have a healthy child, and I said, “I have to do more.” And that’s exactly what I did.

Q: Since St. Jude was the first hospital you donated to, did you try to reach out and form a relationship with that hospital?

A: I did. I called them and initially I just wanted to run a big fundraiser for them. But there was a lot of red tape involved and they were, I don’t want to say hesitant because I would never want to deter anybody from doing that, but it seemed like a bit of a rigamarole. So, I said you know what, why don’t I just help the kids right in my backyard, you know, at St. Joe’s. And they’re right here and that’s where I gave birth to my daughter, and it’s important to me. My husband owns a business in town, and it just made more sense. And that way I control exactly where the money goes and know that every penny goes to the children. I mean I know that St. Jude’s is a beautiful foundation and they do a lot of research, cancer research, which we need. Of course, without them we wouldn’t’ve made the strides we did. But I like the fact that our money goes specifically for the children; we get to pick and choose how it’s spent. And we know where every penny goes.

Q: Did you ever plan on extending to other hospitals, or are you just focusing now on St. Joseph's Children's Hospital?

A: No, totally. Our goal is to have Ladybug funds throughout the country at all different hospitals. Right now, that's where we are, that's where we started, and there's a lot of work to be done at that hospital. The children are really, I don't know how to put it--like some of them go into chemo with no shoes on their feet and no winter coat, so these kids really do need a lot. Other than suffering and battling with this disease, the families can't even afford to throw them birthday parties or anything like that, so that's where we step in and kind of do those special things that put a smile on their faces.

Q: How does Project Ladybug determine whether a child is qualified to be a part of the fund? What are the criteria? Does a patient have to apply for aid or does Project Ladybug choose the patient?

A: We have social workers at the hospital who really work closely with the families and they kind of let us know what is going on with their financial situations. We not only help those that need financial aid. It's more like, while these kids are going through [treatment], we want to do anything. We'll give the moms spa days and let them have a little break. So, it's not only the financial hardships that we pitch in, it's just anything in general, anything we can do. We're developing a lot of programs for the hospital right now--theater programs and acting programs just to take the kids' minds off what they are going through. And we are redoing the treatment room so they're just fun to go into. We're trying to make the hospital a place where kids actually want to go. We have a system right now that's put in place where they work on a points system. For every injection they have to get, or sometimes they have to take huge pills--the more painful, obviously, the more points they get. And then they work towards a goal. When they get a certain amount of points they're given whatever they want in the end--whether it's an iPod or they get to choose some kind of something. We just sent one of our kids to a summer camp because he was doing better and he was able to go; so we financed it.

Q: How does Project Ladybug serve to support the families of the sick children?

A: That's where the social workers come in and they kind of help us out and say, "You know what, this mom is having a really hard time, she's got five children." So they try to let us know exactly what their needs are and we try to base our programs around those needs. You know, sometimes we'll step in for a siblings' birthday party or whatever the case may be. Thank God for the social workers they work very closely with the families.

Q: And they are there all the time?

A: Yes, they work with them on a daily basis.

Q: Is it possible for you to share a success story?

A: Well, we have our one little special ladybug, her name is Leslie. She was our first little girl that we met and we actually met her at a Mother-Daughter Day Spa event that Diana [Dolling-Ross] put together at the hospital. (Dolling-Ross is Dina's publicist and best friend) We kind of converted the theater at the hospital into a spa on Mother's Day, and we did all spa treatments on the mothers while the children made mother's day gifts for their mothers in the next room. So we met Leslie and when we first met her she had a little kerchief on that said "Cancer fears me", and she was just so outgoing, telling us what she wants to be when she grows up. Here she is this little girl battling this with a huge smile and goals for the future. So we kind of fell in love with her and she's in remission right now.

Q: How old is she?

A: She's twelve. And we keep in touch with her, she texts me and we email each other. She's a special little girl. So that was nice because we became very close with her. We have some programs in effect now where we are going to have meet-and-greets with the parents and their children so we can get to know them better. You know, Leslie happened to like hot pink, and she didn't have a hot pink sweat jacket. So that's something with my own money I went out and bought her a little Juicy hot pink sweat jacket. So the more I get to know them the more they're going to benefit. They kind of become like our extended family.

Q: Have you personally had to overcome any obstacles or have you endured any challenges since establishing Project Ladybug?

A: Oh, absolutely. I made a lot of mistakes in the beginning. When I first started the foundation I just wanted to do something good. So you get all excited and you go and you want to just run these fundraisers and stuff--it's a learning process. I'm learning along the way and I'm learning all the rules and regulations. It's a lot different than running an event that I'm used to. There's a lot of guidelines and rules that you have to follow. And getting our non-profit status was definitely a hurdle. It took years and unfortunately our first accountant kind of promised the world and didn't come up with it. You know, I would never want to discourage anyone from starting a foundation, so I hate to say too much, but there are a lot of hoops you have to jump through. We're finally there and we're making our strides and it's worth--it's worth everything we had to go through.

Q: Did you find the television show helped?

A: Oh, absolutely. I mean that is the only reason I did the show and if I continue with Season 2, that will be *the* only reason. That in itself is a hurdle because I don't enjoy the process at all. If it wasn't for the foundation I certainly wouldn't be doing it. But, we've seen a tremendous difference. We started out, like I said, as a small little something I was doing for our hospital in our backyard, and now it's turning into a national foundation. We're arranging walk-a-thons all

over the country and it takes time because, unfortunately, there's things you have to do and contracts and legal issues that you have to work through, and I want to do everything right and make sure I take my time and do it right and not jump into anything. It's kind of frustrating because you want to kind of dive in and do this and do that. But it is a process, which I understand, because there are so many people out there that are doing the wrong thing.

Q: Would you like to set up your website so that people can make direct donations online?

A: Yes, we are in the process of relaunching the whole website, and it's going to be much different. We're also, which is very exciting, we have a lot of corporations who are backing us now. We have a lot of different companies, like jewelry lines, who are making a token ladybug piece that all the proceeds will go [to the foundation]. Everything from a cute little slipper line that's donating proceeds from one of their designs. So we're in the process of setting all that up and it will be on our website, soon I hope. Where you can go on, you can see our sponsors and click on their site and they will have their token ladybug items for sale and all the proceeds will go to the foundation. Again, it's a bit of a process.

Q: How involved is your family in Project Ladybug?

A: Well, my daughter, whether she likes it or not is involved. She comes to all of the events and she always has her job whether its selling t-shirts or whatever. My sisters are on the original board. My sister, Cookie is a huge help. She helps me on the end a lot with the hospital where we come up with the programs. She's at every fundraiser, she's at every hospital visit. My mom actually hand makes every single ladybug token bracelets. They are healing bracelets we sell with a little laced ladybug--my mom hand makes each one of them. So my family is very involved. And I have my extended family like Diana. So it is a big family affair, and everybody that is involved has a passion for it which is important because they all feel as strongly as I do about it and we're doing it for the right reasons.

Q: Lastly, why ladybugs? What do they mean to you and why did you name your organization Project Ladybug?

A: Ladybugs have been a little thing of mine since before my daughter was born. It's a long story. Before I was married to my first husband I went to his mother's grave. She had passed away before I got to meet her so it was my gift to her to clean up her gravesite--it was one of those flat ones. And when I finished I stood up; it was all polished and fresh flowers and a little ladybug ran around the corner and walked in a direct line and then just stood there and flew away. And my sister was with me and she goes, "You know, ladybugs are good luck." And I'm like, "you know what, they are." And from that day on I saw a ladybug, I swear to you it was the weirdest thing, at every special occasion. Whether it was the night of my wedding night--there was a ladybug on my hand; my first apartment--there was a ladybug on the windowsill; my first house--there was a ladybug on the kitchen counter. So when I gave birth to my daughter at St. Joseph's Hospital I was like, literally the first thing after I saw her and introduced myself I said

to the nurse, "There has to be a ladybug in this room, you don't understand." And she's like, "Ok. . .more meds." And I told them, "No, every time--and then I realized, that my daughter was born on her deceased grandmothers' birthday. So I said, "You must've been my ladybug", so I nicknamed her ladybug and she's been my ladybug ever since. So, it's funny because ladybugs do represent hope and so it works for the foundation. It was actually my daughter's idea when we were coming up with names. She goes, "Mom, ladybug." It was like, "of course!" So it makes perfect sense.

If you are interested in making a donation or helping out Project Ladybug please contact Dina Manzo at [ladybugfoundation@gmail.com](mailto:ladybugfoundation@gmail.com), anyone is welcome to volunteer.