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Cancer a cause 'now burning in our hearts'



Courtesy the Ishan Gala Foundation

Ishan Gala enjoys a moment with his father, Mayank Gala. Ishan died from a deadly childhood cancer, neuroblastoma, shortly after turning 2.

By [Brandon Shulleeta](#)

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Sejal Gala remembers being torn about whether to hug her 2-year-old son as he fought neuroblastoma.

Being at his side brought comfort to Ishan, she said, but hugging and other physical contact caused

him pain.

Ishan died a year ago, after fighting a slow battle against the childhood cancer.

Sejal and her husband, Mayank, Charlottesville residents in their early 30s, have since formed a foundation to raise awareness about the disease and help fund treatment research.

“This is a cause that is now burning in our hearts, because we saw what Ishan went through in nine months, and we will continue to fight until the day we leave this Earth,” Mayank Gala said. “I could not sit at home and do nothing.”

The nonprofit, the Ishan Gala Foundation, was formed early this year, and all of the money raised is used to fund research and help support financially drained parents whose children have the disease.

The foundation is hosting a fundraising event, Splash for a Cure, from 5 to 9 p.m. today at the ACAC WaterPark at 200 Four Seasons Drive in Charlottesville. If it rains, the event will be relocated to Covenant Church’s gymnasium at 1025 Rio Road East. Tickets are \$15 for adults and \$10 for children.

Attendees can use the WaterPark, eat local food, listen to music and win prizes.

Proceeds from the food, as well as money from entree and raffle tickets, will go to the foundation. Donations are also accepted. The Galas’ goal is to raise \$100,000.

Neuroblastoma is formed in developing nerve cells and is most commonly found in children younger than 10, according to the foundation.

About 650 children are diagnosed per year as having neuroblastoma, one of the deadliest childhood cancers. Children diagnosed with stage IV neuroblastoma have less than a 30 percent chance of surviving more than three years.

Though the foundation is named after Ishan, “it’s not about him anymore,” Mayank Gala said, adding that the foundation’s mission is to help other children fighting childhood cancer.

The Galas began the foundation largely because little is known about neuroblastoma and because the death rate has remained stagnate for decades. They say they’re using the donations largely toward pilot treatment programs for children and research aimed at replacing chemotherapy with nontoxic treatments.

Ishan died Sept. 6, 2008, seven months after being diagnosed as having stage IV neuroblastoma. Friday would have been his third birthday.

Ishan fought hard before his death, Sejal Gala said, and he virtually never cried.

“He was always smiling and laughing,” she said.

Mayank Gala said Ishan was too young to talk much, but he did say “truck” whenever he spotted them on the road.

“And he said ‘Daddy,’” said Mayank Gala, who was holding Ishan at the time of his death.

“That morning, 7:15, [I was] holding him in my arms and said, ‘You know what? Mom and dad are proud of you. And you know what? You can close your eyes now and when you open them again, you’re going to have a renewed body and you’re going to be perfect,’” Mayank Gala said.

Mayank Gala now wears a bracelet made by his sister, who sells jewelry on the Downtown Mall, which bears an inscription reminding him of the lifelong mission to help other children survive the cancer.

“‘What do you want to write?’” Mayank Gala said his sister asked. “And I said to write, ‘to my beloved son that I’ll continue to fight until we see each other again.’”

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