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Family answers the question 'Why us?' with new sense of purpose

At age 2, Wyatt Kilhefner underwent surgery to have doctors remove a tumor the size of a baseball from his brain. Due to its placement, five percent of the mass could not be excised. Thankfully, Wyatt's tumor has been stable for nearly five years, but the danger of recurrence remains. Thus, his parents, Jerry and Jessica Kilhefner, continue searching for a cure by supporting DFCI's Pediatric Low-Grade Astrocytoma (PLGA) Program. Most recently, the couple gave \$100,000 to bolster efforts led by Charles Stiles, PhD, co-chair of the Department of Cancer Biology, and Mark Kieran, MD, PhD, director of Pediatric Medical Neuro-Oncology, through the couple's "Why Not Me?" Fund.

"When Wyatt was diagnosed, our first thought was 'Why us?' We really struggled with the situation," said Jessica Kilhefner. "Then we realized: It's not 'Why me?' it's 'Why not me?' We are fortunate, educated people with financial resources and a large network of supportive friends, family, and colleagues. If people like us who are in a position to help don't do so, nothing is ever going to change for these kids."

The Kilhefners were drawn to Dana-Farber because of Stiles and Kieran's interest in attacking the under-researched PLGAs. Their program seeks to uncover the genetic mutations that fuel the disease and test novel therapies that could potentially lead to clinical trials.

"Because recurrence is common in PLGAs, the repeated cycles of treatment with radiation and cytotoxic drugs are devastating to the overall health of growing children," said Kieran. "Finding a better approach—such as identifying molecular targets that can be affected with personalized therapies—is critical for these patients." ■



Left to right: Jerry, Wyatt, and Jessica Kilhefner continue their fight against PLGAs, which account for one-third of all pediatric brain tumors and have seen little change in treatment regimens for 25 years.

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