

The Magic Maker: Helping Families with Sick Children

After 16 years on movie sets, Paula DuPre Pesmen gave it up to help families with critically ill kids. This gig, she says, has better perks

By Gerri Hirshey

Acts of Generosity

It's early evening in the foothills of the Rockies, and the four members of the Pesmen household are riding northwest toward another Big Sky sunset, enjoying some rolling family time en route from Denver to their home in Boulder. Curt Pesmen drives the huge black SUV; Joshua, 5, and Jesse, 2, chomp turkey sandwiches in their car seats as their mother, Paula DuPre Pesmen, runs through the day's umpteenth checklist: "Okay, we've got 65 frozen meals in back. Curt, do we still have that case of diapers? They need to go to Ronald McDonald House. Josh, want more sandwich?"

The meals the Pesmens just picked up -- donated by a Denver businesswoman -- are intended to ease the fragile, strained lives of families with critically ill children. So are the diapers. "Babies on chemotherapy can go through twice as many," DuPre Pesmen says. The SUV bears a logo: THERE WITH CARE. The name she chose for the nonprofit she founded at the end of 2005 is also an apt description of 46-year-old DuPre Pesmen's seismic midlife change -- a turnabout that has drawn her whole family in its wake. "There with Care does a lot of small things for families with very sick kids," she says, "but small things can make a big difference."

Case in point: Rick Barber was told that his teenage son Eric might die of his brain tumor. Getting Eric to intensive chemotherapy and radiation treatments proved so time-consuming, Rick was about to lose his job and with it the family home. "I didn't know where to turn," he says -- until TWC volunteers took over the almost daily transport. Eric is now in remission, and, his father says, "These kind souls saved my job and my house."

Coordinating so many acts of generosity -- and more than 100 volunteers -- means a lot of days on the run for the Pesmens, far from the glittering gypsy camps of international movie sets where the family began its life together.

During her 16 years as an associate producer for Hollywood director Chris Columbus, creative, high-pressure problem solving was DuPre Pesmen's stock-in-trade -- from appraising the delicate physics of Robin Williams's faux cleavage in *Mrs. Doubtfire* to debating the special effects of a million-dollar mountain troll to menace Harry Potter. (Columbus is still a close friend and a member of TWC's board; he also donated the \$43,000 SUV.)

Today DuPre Pesmen's problem solving is lower-tech. And the stories often have devastating plots: "We have one woman with a brain tumor, a 2-year-old, and a husband who works days and goes to school at night so he'll have a better-paying job if he has to raise their son alone. We were giving her babysitting help, and she was telling me how she missed being able to cook, because of memory problems."



+ ENLARGE IMAGE

A master of logistics, DuPre Pesmen has shifted her focus from the trolls and Dementors of Harry Potter films to the scourges of pediatric cancer. (Photo: Cheyenne Ellis)

TWC matched her with a volunteer couple. The husband, a cancer survivor, does handiwork around the house. His wife helps the mother make the 2-year-old's lunches for the week. For the mother, each mac-and-cheese victory is huge. "We made a little photo book with descriptions of things the son likes to eat, to help her remember," DuPre Pesmen says. "Our goal with any family is to normalize the situation in whatever way we can."

Although the challenges are vastly different from those of the mad, mad movie days, she says, "The hours are about the same -- seven days a week, and very late at night once the boys are in bed." She worked unpaid for two years; TWC's only salaried employee, a volunteer coordinator, started this past August. In September, the TWC board approved a modest compensation for its founder, which will be at most 15 percent of her former salary. The family lives on Curt's earnings as a freelance writer and publisher. "When people ask about adjusting to a single income, I usually say our karma account is full," DuPre Pesmen says. "It has been a year and a half since I worked on the last film, *Rent*, and I haven't had a day where I didn't feel passionate about what we're doing."

TWC has begun to hum with efficiency, thanks to a new software system that tracks volunteer hours (down to who's driving whom to chemo and when) and donations, and holds comprehensive client databases. The donor who created it "replaced the thousand mental Post-its in my brain," DuPre Pesmen says. The people skills she honed dealing with movie stars and crew, and the organizational chops needed to manage gala premieres, have been brought to bear on local TWC fund-raisers.

Daily, TWC volunteers see to life's smaller essentials as larger dramas play out in ICUs and bone marrow transplant wards. Since Denver's big hospitals serve seven states, many families are marooned in grim rentals while their children undergo treatment. When DuPre Pesmen found families sleeping on floors, she delivered donated beds (as well as clothing and car seats). A frightened teenager going through chemo alone and far from home got a prepaid cell phone and a college-student "mentor" who sat with him during infusions.

Since receiving its first referrals from Denver hospitals, Ronald McDonald House, and local hospices, the charity has served 140 families. "And sadly," DuPre Pesmen says, "we've had 11 losses." Recently, a mother called to say that the TWC babysitters who'd cared for her other kids during her 7-year-old's terminal illness gave her the greatest gift: the ability to spend all her daughter's last hours at her side.

Finding Her Calling

"I adored my old life, but I prefer these perks," DuPre Pesmen says as she listens to a voice mail from Eric Barber, inviting her to "come hang with me and my cancer homeys" on a camping retreat.

The nudge toward her new life came in 2001. Her husband had spent nine months battling advanced colon cancer, and she had just returned to work in the London production offices of the first Potter film, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*. One day she was dealing with the usual details -- a flying purple bus, special effects for the Dementors -- when a critically ill child came to visit the set.

DuPre Pesmen quickly arranged an ad hoc tour; soon the crew was greeting a stream of very ill -- and very thrilled -- visitors. "The makeup people would put Harry's scar on them; the animal handlers had owls perch on wheelchairs," she says. "More than 60 children came over two years, and I started spending time with the parents. I saw how isolated they were."

Her own family life was full and joyful -- she and Curt adopted Josh from Guatemala in 2002 -- but she had fresh memories of isolation. "When Curt had cancer, a lot of people



[+ ENLARGE IMAGE](#)

DuPre Pesmen in Boulder with sons Josh (right) and Jesse, who are now 6 and 3.
(Photo: Cheyenne Ellis)

came around and a lot didn't. They told me later they didn't know what to say or do. I realized that when there's a sick child, it's even harder to approach the family. And I kept thinking I had to do something more to help. Curt was wondering whether I could do it on the side, but I told him I felt like this was my thing -- what I was born to do."

After the third Potter film, *The Prisoner of Azkaban*, wrapped, the family went back to Boulder. In the midst of work on the next film, the Pesmens adopted Jesse, also from Guatemala. By the time *Rent* premiered in November 2005, DuPre Pesmen had a plan, an explanatory video, a clutch of volunteers -- and some nagging misgivings: "I was scared. I had a job I'd loved for 16 years with an amazing company. They were family, there at my wedding, there when Curt got sick, there when I brought my kids home."

Some are still there. Witness a muggy Denver day, just before the opening of the fifth Harry Potter film. Three young actors -- Devon Murray (Harry's pal Seamus), Tom Felton (the malevolent Draco Malfoy) and Jamie Waylett (Hogwarts' bully, Crabbe) -- have come to visit hospitals and lend magic to a fund-raiser.

"Every kid on the sets loved Paula," Murray says. "We grew up with her taking care of us." Walking through a pediatric oncology corridor, our visiting party is halted by the sight of a tiny girl smiling in her crib. Fifi's parents aren't often able to be here, a caseworker explains. The nurses play with her when they can. Today the actors delight her with antics -- and DuPre Pesmen is making another mental note: "We'll get someone in there with that little girl right away."

Toward the end of a long day, two Paulas, past and present, are overlooking the cheerful chaos of the Pesmens' living room. *Movie Paula* -- a life-sized portrait of her, rendered as a dour Elizabethan noblewoman by a Harry Potter set artist -- dominates the wall, overlooking sacks of donated clothes and signed *Potter* memorabilia for a fund-raising auction. "TWC Paula" sits amid it, helping Jesse with a puzzle. "Curt and the boys do a lot of the charity work with me, so it's a family thing that keeps us together," she says.

She tells a story of Josh, who was preparing for a playdate with a brain-injured boy and wondered idly, hey, does this kid have hair?

"I stopped a second and realized he's played with a lot of bald children," she says. "That's just normal to him. Which is what we're all about."

Running the Numbers

- 60 to 70 hours per workweek as an associate movie producer
- 60 to 70 hours per workweek (until recently without pay) in DuPre Pesmen's new gig for There with Care
- \$45 million budget for *Rent*, the last film she worked on
- \$328,750 budget for There with Care for 2008
- 8,500 hours put in by 100-plus There with Care volunteers over the past two years
- 46,865 pounds of food delivered by There with Care over the past two years
- \$23,000 biggest donation, from a Boulder couple
- 84 percentage of families served by There with Care that are low-income or below poverty level

Gerri Hirshey is the author of two books on music and popular culture and currently writes for the New York Times.

*Originally published in **MORE** magazine, March 2008.*

© Copyright 2008 Meredith Corporation. All Rights Reserved.