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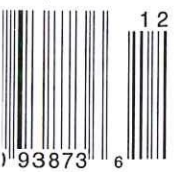


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Left: Jon Albert, founder and president of The Jack & Jill Late Stage Cancer Foundation. Right: Jeff Baker and his son Rheise walking on the beach at The Resort at Longboat Key Club.

PLAYING FOR TIME

Blue skies and puffy clouds fill the sky as Peyton and Rheise Baker skip down the path between the beach and their poolside hotel room. The boys have been collecting shells all weekend, but found something even more spectacular now. Rheise walks up to his father and drops the smooth hooked artifacts into his father's hand. After a short guessing game of what this charcoal black treasure could be, the 8-year-old proudly reveals, "They're shark's teeth!"

The trip to The Resort at Longboat Key Club proves to be an adventure for many families who make the trek and the Bakers are no exception. The Indiana family, of course, couldn't help sweating some of the small stuff before coming here—weather reports, packing the right clothes, plotting activities the kids would enjoy—but once in this island paradise the family experienced the goal of pure relaxation, minus the typical anxieties.

But how much more anxious does planning a vacation become if you know this family trip could be the last one you can take?

As Chris Baker and husband Jeff prepared for what could be their last big family adventure, the mother's enthusiasm somehow felt a little bit sweeter, the stresses more bland. "You just try to focus on the good stuff," she explained. "I can't quite say I've become immune to the stress, but it seems many of the things that would have mattered before, you just put them behind you."

At least with this trip, the Bakers could rely on The Jack and Jill Late Stage Cancer Foundation to book, plan and pay for the journey. The Sarasota nonprofit organization specializes in getting rid of such stresses for families with much bigger things to worry about than price shopping. "I feel like royalty," jokes Jeff. "It's just been amazing." That's good, because all the Bakers want right now is to enjoy a nice trip to Siesta Key, just like many others will this season, but with a better reason than most.

Jeff, a 36-year-old father of six, doesn't want to think so much about the Stage 4 cancer that has cost parts of his liver and colon, and which doctors tell him could cause his death in the next four to six months. No, that's not what the Baker family is thinking about on this vacation. Jeff has a pair of 2-year-old twins, David and Elizabeth, to stroll with on the beach. He has Peyton, 9, and Rheise, who turned 8 mere hours before the family boarded the plane and who has a Batman birthday cake in the hotel room that needs some unvarnished attention. The older kids are old enough to know home life isn't what it's supposed to be right now, but they deserve the trip of their lives.

"We want to make lasting memories, put the C-word behind us, and just hang out as a family," Chris says. "It just gives you a break. It gives Jeff the opportunity to spend all of his time on them. You don't have to worry about anything else because you are away from home—from chemo and radiation and surgeries.

"It will mean a lot," says a wife turning her eyes toward beach time and away from pain. "To them. And to him."



WRITTEN BY JACOB OGLES | PHOTOGRAPHY BY JESSICA MCKNIGHT



Stinging Roots

The Bakers are the most recent family to benefit from the actions of the Jack and Jill Late Stage Cancer Foundation, but sadly the list of future beneficiaries is long. Jon Albert, the foundation's founder, deals with a waiting list of potential recipients of services, every one a family being actively torn apart by a terminal disease.

The mission of Jack and Jill is to provide care for the children of parents with cancer, done through the creation of memories on family vacations fully funded through corporate and in-kind donations. The organization remains the only foundation in the United States focused on the offspring of cancer patients, a cause too close to Albert's own heart.

"I am so fortunate in what we get to do here," Albert says. "I hate why I started the foundation. I hate it. But I cannot tell you how this experience has been, and how professionally rewarding it is." Like the families served by Jack and Jill today, Albert's own family was delivered terrible news in 2002 when Jill Albert, Jon's wife, was diagnosed with breast cancer. She was 40, too young to have her life cut short, but the first concern for both Jon and Jill was the impact the disease would have on their children. Son Jake and daughter Jaime were 9 and 7 respectively, and suddenly facing the prospect of enormous loss in their lives.

Of course, the couple at first refused to let pessimism destroy the family. "You will know many cancer survivors in a lifetime," Jon says thoughtfully. The couple steered themselves for a difficult treatment process, but clung to optimism as well, and not without reason. In fact, after

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Jon Albert, Founder and CEO of Jack and Jill Late Stage Cancer Foundation

seeing some of the best doctors the couple could reach, Jill was given a 98 percent chance of full survivorship. "The truth is, the C-word is not as scary as it once was."

That prognosis changed, though, when the cancer metastasized. Suddenly cancer was showing up in Jill's back and coursing through her blood. The fight continued, but it was a losing battle. In November 2006, at age 45, Jill Albert succumbed to the disease.

Along the way, though, the experience did more to Jon than raise his own awareness of breast cancer. He learned more about the disease than he ever wanted to know, of course, but the important lessons came from caring for his wife through the heavy emotional turmoil. Along the way, an emotional breakdown in fact would set Jon upon a new path in life. It came after a particular difficult evening when Jill was sick and unable to sleep. Amid dry heaves, she confessed her greatest fear—not simply dying but being absent. "She was afraid the kids would forget her," Jon recalls. "She was already battling this cruel, painful disease, but her biggest pain was in her heart, and it is a cruel fear to be afraid your own children would forget you."

Jill eventually fell asleep that night, but the experience left Jon searching the Web until dawn. He wanted to know if a group was out there could help ease this particular anxiety. He started to germinate the idea of Jack and Jill in his own mind. Could a group create memories that would last a lifetime? And not just the cancer patient's but the lifetimes of those close to them who would live on? Could an outsider ensure the finest moments shared by a parent and child

outside a hospital room? He decided then he would create such a group himself. When he presented the concept to his wife, of course, it was duly noted that launching a foundation while caring for an ailing family was beyond insane. The first thing Jon needed to place his attention was on his own family's welfare. But when Jill died, her obituary in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* asked that in lieu of flowers, donations be made to the Jack and Jill Late Stage Cancer Foundation.

Living Not Dying

It's amazing how the worst news eventually becomes part of the backdrop around your life. To hear Terri Shobe describe her Stage 4 pancreatic cancer, one would think she was mentioning a weakness in her eye, or an unfortunate birthmark.

Shobe, now 39, was first diagnosed four years ago, and in the years between then and now, her cancer has spread at times to her liver and ovaries; most recently her lungs have come under risk. Surgeries so far have bought her time, but it's clear this fight will only end one way. "It is terminal," Shobe says matter-of-factly.

There are days of crying, of course. In fact it may be the attitude today is the more irrational response. She talks about the impact of chemotherapy on even basic thought processes. "They call it chemo brain," she says. "It affects you. Some days I don't think I could tell you my name." At least for the moment, she says, the fog is lifting. "Today I'm taking a break from the chemo to give my body a rest. Other than that, we're still just trucking along."

Some days she would like to forget. For the whole family to forget. But not all of them. She doesn't need to think before the cancer to recall good times with her husband Levi, and her children, 13-year-old daughter September, 12-year-old Bryston and 12-year-old stepson Travis. This fall, the family was able to enjoy their own getaway to Siesta Key courtesy of Jack and Jill. "It was the trip of a lifetime," she says, "and something we never would have been able to do on our own." Months in the making, the Shobes were flown to Sarasota by United Airlines, then put up at the Hyatt Siesta Key. The family cooked s' mores at a beachfront bonfire in the evenings, and even took a shuttle to Disney World.

Just weeks after the end of the trip, the whirlwind of everything overwhelms Terri. She has trouble recalling what restaurants hosted her family, which theme park they visited. But still then Jack and Jill has the family covered. A photo book of memories still in the mail will preserve key

bits of information about the trip forever. "It's something my children will be able to remember when I am long gone," she says. "That was very important to me."

It's important for the foundation for a variety of reasons. The photos taken on trips serve not just to make keepsakes for the families, but also to catalog the triumphs of the organization. The website for Jack and Jill showcases pictures of dozens of families enjoying family trips, many of those pictures captioned with a name of a lost parent and years demarking a lifespan.

"When you see the pictures of these children, that's when it strikes you hard emotionally," says Jon Albert. But while every picture on the site shows a family in the midst of a struggle with a cancer, you wouldn't know unless you were told. A family stands on the deck of a cruise ship, both kids wrapping their arms around a father while they laugh through the photo shoot. A mother sits on a theme park bench while children look for the nearest ride. "These families are going through three to five years of hell, and then a death," Albert notes. "But we are in the business of creating positive memories."

So every family gets professional photos. Every family gets a framed photo to hang on the wall that captures the good times, because these are the times that matter most.

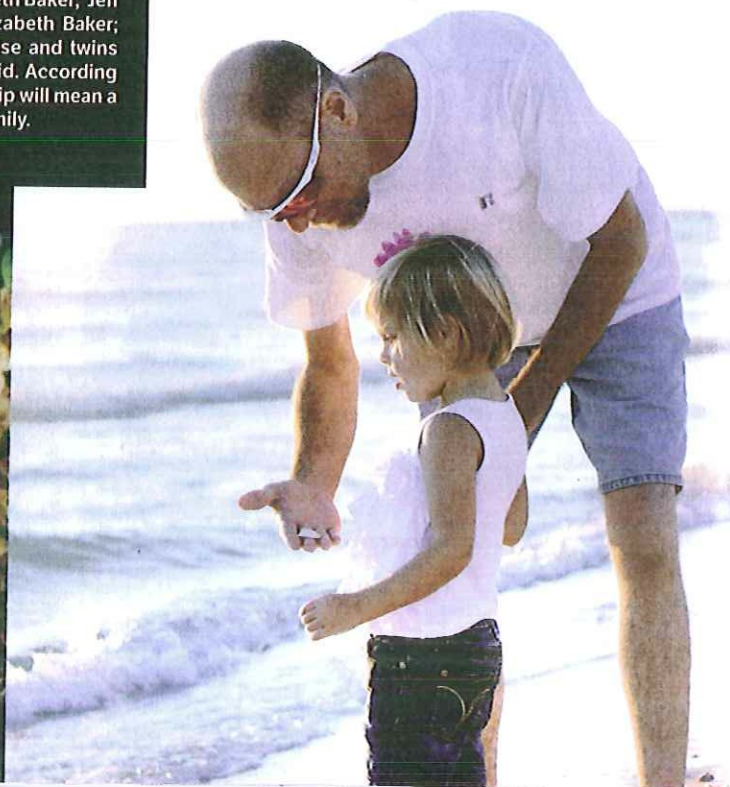
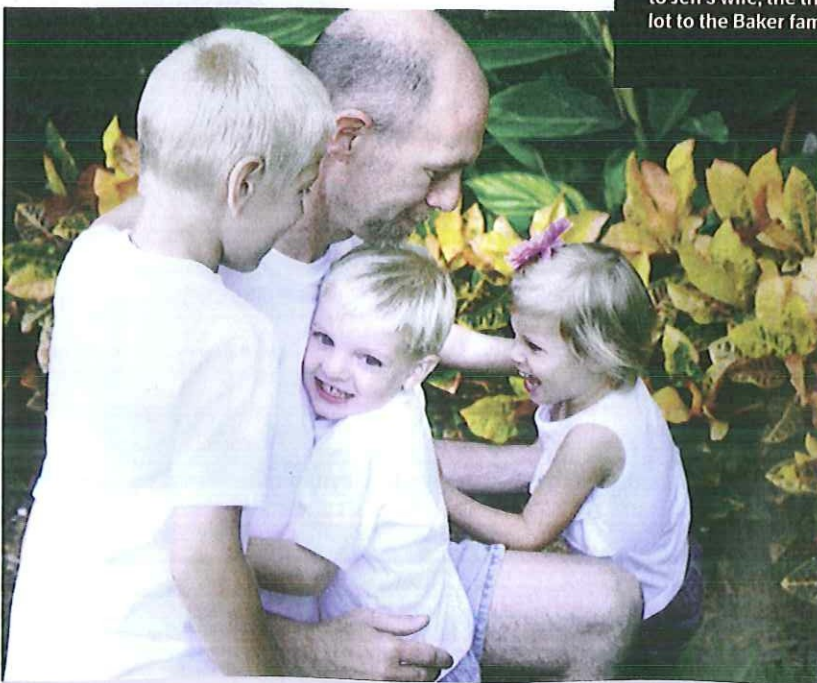
Light Before Darkness

For Tricia Dow, it's difficult to have a conversation without her voice cracking and her eyes welling up uncontrollably, especially when she starts to talk about her children and the effect her cancer has had on their lives. For 3-year-old Evie, it's less alarming. Tricia was diagnosed with melanoma toward the end of the pregnancy, so a reality where mom does doctor visits more often than the kids is all the little girl has ever known. But for 8-year-old Alex, things are different. "He has more of an adult grasp," Tricia says. "He knows it, because I'm slowed down by my medical issues."

And he was old enough to ask, during the family's recent Jack and Jill-supported trip to the Hyatt Regency Sarasota in September, if it was only for these dark reasons that the

"Today I'm taking a break from the chemo to give my body a rest. Other than that, we're still trucking along." —Terri Shobe

Clockwise: Elizabeth Baker; Jeff with daughter Elizabeth Baker; Jeff with son Rheise and twins Elizabeth and David. According to Jeff's wife, the trip will mean a lot to the Baker family.



vacation was happening at all. "At one point he was distracted," Tricia recalls, just before she breaks down in tears for a moment. "There was a conflict in him, and he was having such a wonderful time, but he asked if maybe the reason we were there was because I was sick." It's a hard conversation to have, but an impossible one to evade. Tricia and her husband Jason explained that yes, the cancer made the family eligible for the vacation, but that was because doctors felt it was important for the children to have a good time with their family.

"I said I'd rather not be sick, but I said how wonderful it was that we could take this vacation together," Tricia recalls. The one talk was enough to shake any bad thoughts.

"I said I'd rather not be sick, but I said how wonderful it was that we could take this vacation together. As soon as I returned I ended up being hospitalized and they found a tumor embedded in my spine."—Tricia Dow

Alex enjoyed the rest of the trip, the mother says, reconciled to the sad facts of life that brought the family to the beach but still free to enjoy the sand. "He said 'I know your sick, but you're fine right now, so I don't want to think about it.' "

Besides that one moment, there was no more talk of cancer while the Dow family enjoyed their Florida trip. Michelle Tarullo, spokeswoman for Hyatt Siesta Key, had worked with the foundation and Tricia to ensure the children had a custom-designed hospitality experience. When the hotel learned Evie was obsessed with Disney princesses, Tarullo called a friend in Lake Buena Vista and convinced some "real" Disney princesses to trek away from the theme park to greet the Dows at the door when the family arrived at the hotel. Alex loves high-tech gadgets, so the hotel scrounged up a refurbished iPhone and loaded it with games for the boy to play at the hotel—and for when he took the new device home.

"They just took off with that before we ever set foot in Florida," Tricia recalls. From a boat tour of Mote Aquarium to a poolside screening of *Frozen*, the children were coddled, the parents comforted.

When the trip ended, reality loomed. "As soon as I returned I ended up being hospitalized and they found a tumor embedded in my spine," Tricia says. Closer examination found four new tumors that had grown on her brain. She entered a whole new round of therapy, but the cancer has progressed. The vacation to Siesta was likely the last family trip Tricia will be able to take.

It's a scenario Albert knows too well. His organization each year puts together a bound booklet for board members showing the families helped each calendar year, and of the 12 pictured in the 2013 collection, eight have since lost the cancer-stricken parent. Of course, many parents given six-month prognosis are able to fight on longer. A few hold out for years. But in many cases that prognosis turns out to be completely accurate. In the most dramatic situations, parents have been lost within weeks of the family trip. Tricia has already lasted longer than that, but she knows it will eventually be her time to go. The pictures of the trip, and the memories themselves, won't fade so soon.

Running on Kindness

Within the Jack and Jill organization's internal vernacular, the family vacations organized throughout the year are dubbed "WOW!" experiences, called such because they seek not just to provide weekend jaunts for families but to blow families away from the get-go. The entire expense of a trip is covered through the foundation, from the moment an airline shuttle shows up at the door to pick a family up to the time someone helps unload luggage once the trip is through. Along the way, families enjoy five-star accommodations in some of the most lavish hotels in the world.

It might shock people that such amazing memories are created on the cheap. Today, Albert and a staff of two employees within a small office in the Northern Trust building in Downtown Sarasota run the entire national organization. Other than himself, Albert relies on an executive director, Heidi Cohen, and a development director, Lindsay King. According to the organization's financials from 2012, the foundation worked with just under \$1.6 million in revenue and spent less than \$1.1 million. Considering the foundation has served more than 900 families since its inception, that's a stunning return on investment each year. Albert said the work is made possible thanks to in-kind donations, primarily from hotels and airlines, but also various hospitality organizations around the country.

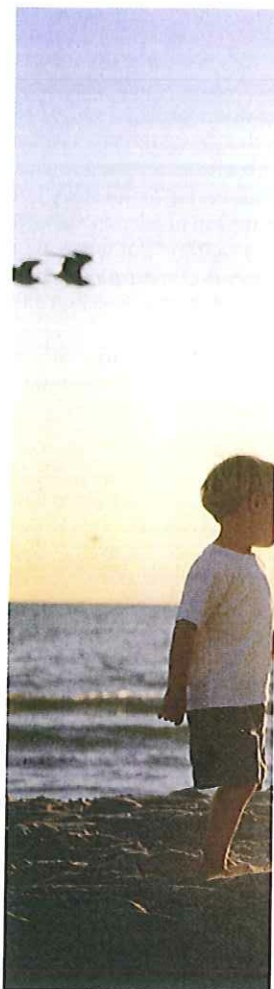
In total, he estimates about \$11 million in goods and services get donated to the cause each year. Perhaps the most important are plane tickets provided by United Airlines and JetBlue; the airlines cover almost all the travel expenses, an absolutely essential cost of each WOW!. Beyond that, Albert over the years has cultivated relationships with everyone from Disney to the National Football League and Major League Baseball.

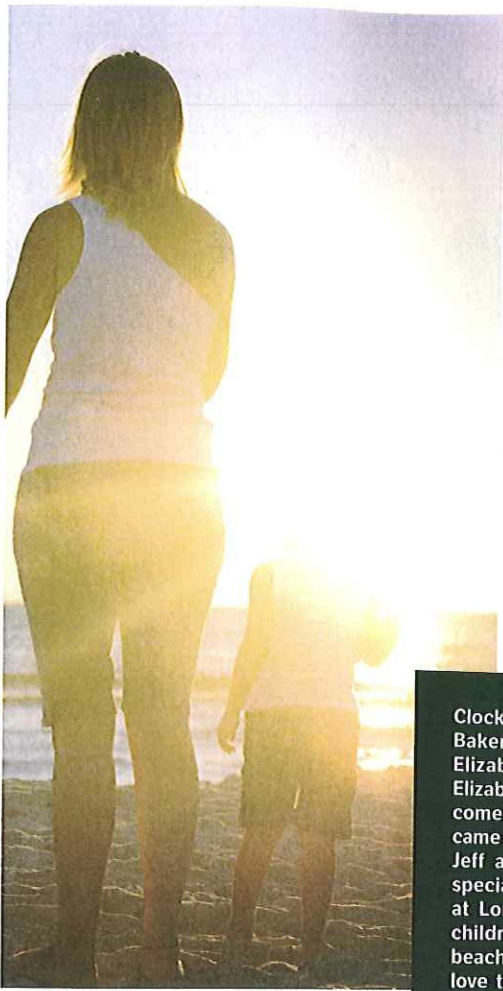
Hoteliers, of course, also end up with personal connections to the foundation. Damien O' Riordan, general manager for the Ritz-Carlton, Sarasota, said his organization has no second thoughts about contributing resources themselves. "Jack and Jill's mission to provide memorable and meaningful life experiences closely aligns with what we strive to do every day at The Ritz-Carlton, Sarasota," O' Riordan says, "and we are so pleased our ladies and gentlemen were able to create a positive experience for a family going through a most difficult time."

Tarullo said the Hyatt organization was anxious to get involved, and that plenty of other organizations around town were ready to help as well. Every time a Jack and Jill family comes to stay at the Hyatt, they find personalized treats from the Lollicake Queen waiting. Before photo shoots, professional hairdressers with existing relationships with the Hyatt donate time making families look pretty. "It's important to the staff and to the community to get involved in things that are impactful on people's lives," she says.

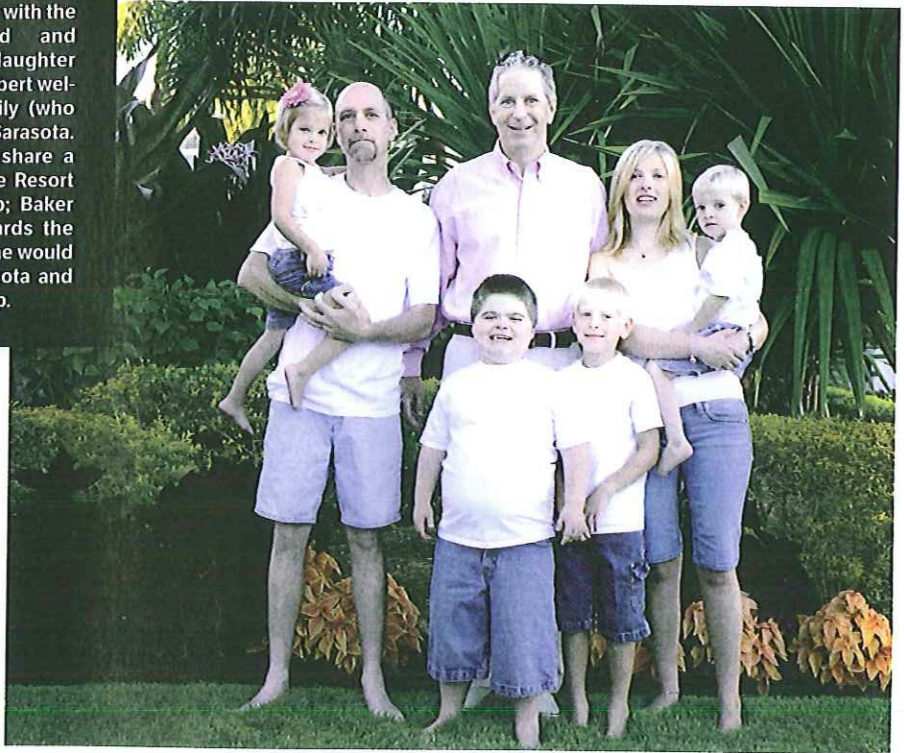
Since Albert moved to Sarasota from Atlanta, relocating the corporate headquarters for Jack and Jill at the same time, he has brought more families to the Suncoast as a result. That's not just because of his own love for the Siesta sands. Albert as a point of pride doesn't deal in the level of extravagant hype-making as other wish-granting foundations, but because he has a more limited budget—and frankly a much larger group of potential clients to serve—he also can't let every family dream up a Paris sojourn or book a penthouse overlooking the Magic

continued on page 71





Clockwise: Chris Baker with the Baker twins David and Elizabeth; Jeff with daughter Elizabeth Baker; Jon Albert welcomes the Baker family (who came from Indiana) to Sarasota. Jeff and Chris Baker share a special moment at The Resort at Longboat Key Club; Baker children running towards the beach. Jeff Baker said he would love to return to Sarasota and felt energized by the trip.



Playing for Time *cont'd*

Kingdom. Instead, families who get served by Jack and Jill get offered a slate of options for grand vacations. If you like the beach or the mountains, you will get what you like, but will stay at hotels working with the foundation.

Interestingly, Jeff Mayers, general manager of The Resort at Longboat Key Club, has known Albert since before either one of the men lived in Sarasota. While Mayers was still running the Sawgrass Marriott Golf Resort and Spa, he spoke with Albert about Jack and Jill work before the foundation moved to the Suncoast. The Longboat resort has hosted three families for the foundation, two (including the Bakers) since Mayers took over at the Club two years ago. "Anything we can do to create an everlasting experience for these families is the right thing to do," Mayers said. "Jon has always been passionate about this, and I'm supportive of what he is doing."

Albert consciously works to bring more hotels into the fold. Supporter Shaun Merriman, president of Gateway Bank of Southwest Florida, hosted a local community education event on October 28 looking in part for donations to the group, but mostly to help bring more organizations into the fold. Albert also hopes to pull together a panel of young professionals to boost the organization, an approach that worked well in Atlanta. "This is the community where I live," Albert says. "I know it's not so easy to knock on the door of every philanthropist in town and say, 'Fall in love with us too,' but we need to get on the radar here."

Near and Far

Not every family served by Jack and Jill hails from out-of-state. Rob Elliott, a Bradenton father of two boys, lost his wife Shari a year ago, but not before Jack and Jill helped the entire family. Shari was referred to Jack and Jill by Florida Cancer Specialists, and Rob still chuckles recalling a phone conversation with the foundation. He was offered a trip to Disney, but the family had annual passes already. Then he was offered a trip to New York, but the family had been there before too. Then an option was presented he never thought of himself—a Wyoming dude ranch.

"I called my wife and told her what I chose, and she said she wanted a divorce." Shari for years harbored a fear of horses, and this did not sound like a dream excursion. Rob reminded her, though, the trip was for the kids. The boys, Jordan and Justin, did love it, of course. The whole family could play cowboy. Ranch hands welcomed the youngsters with roping and riding lessons.

But a funny thing happened with Shari. She agreed to pose for one picture on a horse, then ended up on a family ride. By the time she was done, her fear of horses was gone. Upon returning home to Manatee County, she called up the Sarasota Manatee Association for Riding Therapy. For the last two years of her life, Shari volunteered, helping countless others heal with the help of horses. Shari died in October 2013 at age 52, but Jordan and Justin, now 13 and 12,

still volunteer there today. Rob chose not to emphasize the anniversary of his wife's death; the boys had been through so much grief already. But he got surprised that week to hear laughter downstairs in the home. He found the boys flipping through a Jack and Jill-created scrapbook of the ranch vacation. "It was something they [Jordan and Justin] took upon themselves to pull out," Rob says. "They can always look back on this. When someone is given a limited time on earth, it's really the good times that matter."

Paying it Forward

There is a group of rising philanthropists who know too well the importance of Jack and Jill. After nearly a decade in operation, hundreds of children have now been served by the foundation, many of them are now adults.

Kayla Smith was still a teenager when her mother Gaylene was diagnosed with colon cancer in June 2009. Then 18, Kayla just barely counted as an adult, but her younger sisters, 13-year-old Katie and 16-year-old Kristina, fell firmly within the age range served by Jack and Jill. All were dealing at too young an age with the rapid disintegration of their mother's health. After Gaylene was moved into Hospice a mere eight months after her initial diagnosis, social workers suggested a trip through the foundation may be in order for the health of the family, and in April 2010, the Smiths flew to the Bahamas and checked into the Sheraton Cable Beach Resort in Nassau, where they had a wraparound valley in their suite that offered an ocean view.

"My mom was a travel agent, so we had traveled together before, but this was the most amazing last trip we ever could have hoped for," Kayla recalls. The U.S. Ambassador to the Bahamas greeted the family off the plane. The mother and three daughters were treated each night to fine dining. And while too many conversations in the past months had been about the handling of final affairs, this trip was to be a cancer-free zone.

One time, that rule was violated by necessity. Gaylene at dinner had an upset stomach and retreated to her hotel room away from the girls. Kayla followed to the room to find her mother heaving. Gaylene tried to shoo her daughter back downstairs to enjoy the hotel amenities. Not that night. The two stuck it out together in the room. "My mom knew she was sick," Kayla says through tears. "She knew deep down this was going to be our last trip together."

One difficult evening was a small price to pay for the time spent together, Kayla says. It only seemed more precious when Gaylene passed away in June 2010 at age 43, less than a year after her initial diagnosis. "When I think back to memories of my mother," Kayla says "that trip was one of the most important ones. We were all together, just having fun and living life as we knew it."

Kayla today is 24, but far from done with the Jack and Jill foundation. After her mother's death, Kayla went on to attend the University of

Minnesota, where every year she organized a charity fundraiser in her mother's honor. Her last year in college, the chosen cause was Jack and Jill, and it proved to be the most successful effort of her school career. After a series of spaghetti dinners and silent auctions, Kayla pulled together an \$11,000 bounty. She flew to Sarasota this fall to present Albert with the check.

Fostering Hope

Whatever God's plan may be for the remainder of Jeff Baker's life, he is loving Longboat Key too much to say this is his last vacation. While he looks physically gaunt, this father of six (two adult children aren't on this trip) has enjoyed his resort stay.

"I'd definitely be into coming back," he tells his wife. "It's really relaxing. It helps me get my energy back. I don't have to sit down to get to feeling okay." The vacation will end. Jeff is scheduled for more surgeries as soon as the family flies back to Indiana. He'd like to end a leave of absence at work and get back in a plant where he builds spinal implants. Who knows where his health goes from here.

But while the family remains in Florida, the fun is nonstop, the level of relaxation absolutely exhausting. In the hotel room, David just woke from a nap and seems to be keeping his grandmother (Jeff's mom) busy exploring the three-room suite. The rest of the kids are returning from their shelling expedition, where Elizabeth, it seems, has also been exhausted and needs to be carried back on the shoulder of hotel staff.

Peyton and Rheise add to their collection of shells and sharks' teeth. The boys earlier today visited Mote Aquarium—"I liked the fish," Peyton says with emphatic enthusiasm. Rheise wants to take a sea turtle named Caleb home but has to settle for a plush turtle he already has given the same name. It seems the only sad part of the Bakers' trip will be the ride back to the airport.

Albert grins as the family relates highlights of the trip. He doesn't always get to meet the families the foundation serves, though more chances may arise as Sarasota becomes a more frequent go-to vacation spot. The Bakers have a contagious enthusiasm about the vacation and the services of Jack and Jill. That pleases Albert. "The whole point is to give these families a break," he says.

He doesn't linger long. This is a family vacation, and he doesn't want to horn in. Still these trips seem to do as much to renew Albert's spirits as they do the families' themselves. And while every family has a personal battle they could lose, it's comforting the cause will last. Past Jill. Past Gaylene. Past Shari. And past the parents who will pass in the future. "It's important that this continue," Albert says. "This is going to have a lifetime impact on these children." And with that, Albert drives away from the resort, back to the real world, where he will get to work helping the next family living through a nightmare to have at least one more beautiful dream come true. **SRQ**