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2024

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## AFLAC CANCER AND BLOOD DISORDERS CENTER DONOR IMPACT REPORT

# A letter from the Chief



Dear Friends,

At the Aflac Cancer and Blood Disorders Center of Children's Healthcare of Atlanta, we are actively working to transform the way we care for pediatric cancer and blood disorders, striving every day to secure a healthier future for the growing number of kids impacted by these complex diseases. The good news: We're making progress.

Inside this report, you'll see many milestones, programs and services that were made possible because of our team's dedication, innovation and hard work—and because of our supporters' commitment to help us continue meeting the healthcare needs of kids across Georgia and beyond.

Thanks to you, we achieved one of the most notable milestones in Children's history in 2024. The opening of Arthur M. Blank Hospital has made an incredible impact on our ability to provide advanced specialty care to the more than 9,800 kids we see each year, including more than 500 children newly diagnosed with cancer.

This new facility has allowed us to consolidate our hematology and oncology services under one roof, which means greater opportunities for collaboration among our team, more streamlined support for patients and families, and more dedicated space for breakthroughs to happen.

Collaboration and innovation are essential to finding new cures and saving more lives. That's why we are proud to have over 200 open clinical trials for kids diagnosed with cancer or a blood disorder, more than 30 of which are investigator-initiated. This puts us among the top five institutions in the nation for clinical trial enrollment as part of the Children's Oncology Group (COG). We are also one of approximately 20 premier pediatric oncology programs making up the COG Phase 1 and Pilot Consortium, which is working to expedite treatment advances for childhood cancer.

Our center is at the forefront of the field of pediatric hematology/oncology. We are one of the largest programs of its kind in the country, and we're also one of the best, ranked among the nation's leading pediatric cancer programs by U.S. News and World Report. We care for some of the most complex patients, learning from each and every one and sharing our knowledge and expertise with others, so that we can foster progress and make an impact beyond our walls.

As I look ahead to the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Aflac Cancer and Blood Disorders Center, I am confident we will raise the bar even higher and continue to advance the level of care we provide. Thank you for joining us as we strive to find a cure and give every child the lifetime they deserve.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Douglas K. Graham".

Douglas K. Graham, MD, PhD  
Chief, Aflac Cancer and Blood Disorders Center  
Division Chief, Pediatric Hematology/Oncology/BMT  
Children's Healthcare of Atlanta  
Professor of Pediatrics  
Emory University School of Medicine  
William G. Woods, MD, Chair



# Austin bravely pushes through challenging treatment for leukemia

There's only one person who can get Austin smiling on his toughest days: his little sister, Oakley. These two are a team. They share something that someday may save Austin's life. Four-year-old Austin has B-cell acute lymphoblastic leukemia (B-ALL). He also has a condition called adrenoleukodystrophy (ALD), a rare genetic condition affecting the nervous system and adrenal glands, which doctors have been monitoring since he was an infant.

After navigating the challenges of ALD, Austin and his family came to Children's to help them find answers that would explain Austin's repeat illnesses and infections. That's when they discovered that Austin has B-ALL. He was diagnosed at age 2 and began chemotherapy immediately.

At the Aflac Cancer and Blood Disorders Center, Austin has access to a team of providers with specialized expertise, as well as the most advanced treatments available. "The treatment for B-ALL is long and complicated," says Austin's oncologist, John Bergsagel, MD, aka "Dr. B." "A lot of the treatment can be given as an outpatient, but several hospitalizations are required for chemotherapy and immunotherapy."

*"The treatment journey has been tough," says Austin's mom, Chelsea. "But he keeps pushing forward when times are tough and has never given up. He handles his treatment better than most adults could ever handle it."*

Austin is now in remission. He's running and jumping again. He's playing T-ball and enjoying his giant treehouse. "The outcome looks good for him," says Chad, Austin's dad.



**Austin**

Under close watch of Dr. B and the rest of his Children's care team, Austin is expected to finish treatment in 2025. But, should the cancer return or if his ALD progresses, Austin has options. A blood and marrow transplant (BMT) has been shown effective in treating both conditions. And Austin has a perfect genetic match if he ever needs one: his sister, Oakley. "[Austin] protects her," says Chelsea. "It's like he knows that she's special and was made for him."

**Scan to view  
Austin's story**



# Aflac Cancer and Blood Disorders Center

## At a glance

We are one of the **largest** pediatric cancer centers in the country, treating **more than 500** new cancer patients annually.

We **cared for more than 2,225 kids** in our Cancer Survivorship Program between 2020 and 2024.

We have the **largest** pediatric sickle cell disease program in the country, treating **more than 2,100** unique pediatric patients with sickle cell disease in 2024.

We saw patients from **45 states and territories** over the past five years.

We performed **84 blood and marrow transplants (BMTs)** in 2024, making us one of the **largest pediatric BMT programs** in the country.

Our Immunohematology and Immune Dysregulation Program team has **treated nearly 700 patients**.

As Georgia's top pediatric cancer research center, we're developing new and innovative cancer treatments right here in Atlanta.

Our patients have access to **more than 200 clinical trials**, more than **30** of which are investigator-initiated.

Our institutional precision medicine sequencing protocol has **enrolled over 450 patients** to date.

We were among the **first investigators** to receive approval to do a **phase 1 gene therapy study** in India to determine whether genetically engineered cells are safe and effective for the treatment of hemophilia A.

# Thanks to philanthropic support

We are ranked among the **top five in the country** for Children's Oncology Group (COG) therapeutic clinical trial enrollment, and we are one of approximately 20 premier pediatric oncology programs making up the COG Phase 1 and Pilot Consortium, which is working to expedite **new treatments for childhood cancer**.

## Awards and accomplishments

We continue to improve outcomes for children, teens and young adults with sickle cell disease thanks to renewed grants from the **Abraham J. & Phyllis Katz Foundation**, which helps us make potentially curative hematopoietic stem cell transplantation more accessible to patients.



With support from **Peach Bowl Inc.**, **Sarah Mitchell, MD**, is launching the first immunotherapy trial for children with osteosarcoma using a drug that has shown success as an upfront therapy for other pediatric cancers.



**Jason Yustein, MD**, received the inaugural TORCH (Transformational Outcomes for Rare Cancer Heroes) Initiative grant from the **Isabella Santos Foundation** to further the study of alternative therapies to treat osteosarcoma and improve outcomes for kids with advanced or relapsed disease.



Supported by a research grant from **CURE Childhood Cancer**, **Debrah DeRyckere, PhD**, is studying the development of acute myeloid leukemia (AML) bone marrow organoids for pediatric precision medicine applications.



# Celebrating 30 years of partnership with Aflac Inc.

This year, we have the honor of celebrating 30 years of partnership with Aflac Inc. What started as a \$3 million pledge has grown to nearly \$200 million in contributions from Aflac employees and agents nationwide. Thanks to their generosity and ongoing commitment to help advance the care of childhood cancer and blood disorders, the Aflac Cancer and Blood Disorders Center has impacted thousands of lives and has become one of the leading pediatric cancer and blood disorders programs in the country.

The progress we've made over the past 30 years is extraordinary. Throughout these three decades of innovation and change, one thing has remained constant: Patients remain at the center of everything we do. This is possible because of the unwavering support of Aflac Inc.

## Aflac Cancer and Blood Disorders Center through the years

### 1998

- The Aflac Cancer and Blood Disorders Center opens at Egleston Hospital.



### 1995

- Aflac Inc. makes the commitment to establish the Aflac Cancer and Blood Disorders Center with an initial gift of \$3 million.



### 1998

- We perform the **first cord blood transplant** in the country for a patient with sickle cell disease.

### 2013

- The Aflac Cancer and Blood Disorders Center becomes **one of the first in the country** to offer therapeutic MIBG treatment, which uses radio-labeled iodine molecules (I-131) to target tumors like neuroblastoma and pheochromocytoma.



### 2001

- The Cancer Survivor Program** is established to provide long-term, follow-up care tailored to survivors of childhood cancer.



### 2014

- We perform our **1,000<sup>th</sup> blood and marrow transplant** (BMT), making us one of the highest-volume centers for BMT in the country.



## 2017

Thanks to CURE Childhood Cancer, we launched our **Precision Medicine Program**, leveraging genomic sequencing for pediatric patients with high-risk tumors, with the goal of identifying alterations that can impact therapies and improve outcomes.



## 2019

**Peach Bowl Inc.** grants \$20 million to open new phase 1 clinical trials, with funding to be prioritized for the most promising drug trials that accelerate new treatment strategies for children with cancer.

The Aflac Cancer and Blood Disorders Center opens the **Columbus Sickle Cell Clinic**, providing specialty outpatient care to pediatric patients in the Columbus area.

Findings from a Children's-led study advanced a new treatment method for hemophilia A, which was named **"The Atlanta Protocol"** after the place where the treatment originated.

## 2024

The new Aflac Cancer and Blood Disorders Center opens at **Arthur M. Blank Hospital**, which houses hematology and oncology services under one roof.



## 2023

A multidisciplinary team at the Aflac Cancer and Blood Disorders Center treated its first patient with liver cancer utilizing **Y90 (Yttrium-90) radioembolization**, which delivers targeted, high-dose radiation directly to the liver tumor.

## 2020

Our **Fellowship Program** expands to include six first-year recruits, bringing the total to 18 to 20 a year, up from just three at the start, making it one of the largest pediatric hematology/oncology fellowship programs in the country.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration approves a **new drug** tested at Children's for patients ages 12 and up targeting the underlying cause of sickle cell disease.

# The Loughrans make a lasting impact with support for a new infusion room



Pediatric endocrinologist Lillian Meacham, MD, Medical Director of the Cancer Survivor Program and Kathleen V. Amos Children's Chair for Cancer Survivorship, pictured with Jordan Loughran soon after his leukemia diagnosis (left) and as a teen cancer survivor (right)



For 17 years, Children's has been a part of the Loughran family. From the time of their son Jordan's leukemia diagnosis at age 2, through four years of rigorous treatments and periods of uncertainty when the disease relapsed, Lee and Trey Loughran turned to our team for advanced care and support.

"The doctors, nurse practitioners, nurses and techs were such high caliber and so kind that we immediately felt like we had a terrific team on our side," says Lee. "Our journey is in a positive place. Our son is now a sophomore in college. Seventeen years later, after that initial visit to Children's, we still receive best-in-the-country care from the Survivor Program team on our annual visits."

To show their gratitude, the Loughrans have given back to Children's in many ways over the years. They have participated in community events, provided meals to patients and families in the hospital, made financial contributions and taken part in the Hope and Will Ball. But after a tour of the new Arthur M. Blank Hospital, Lee and Trey were inspired to do even more and offer support for this transformative project.

"We were really moved to lean into our support for [the Aflac Cancer and Blood Disorders Center] when we saw the

new floor at Arthur M. Blank hospital," says Lee. "The thoughtfulness that shaped the design of patient rooms, infusion spaces, outdoor access and the welcoming feel of the lobby and public spaces was so moving."

**“**  
*"Coming out of that tour, we thought about what we could do to support this wonderful hospital and all the courageous families it would serve,"*  
**”**  
says Lee.

The Loughrans made a \$50,000 contribution in 2024 to fund one of our private infusion rooms. It's a gift that will impact countless patients and families, providing them with a comfortable space to receive chemotherapy treatments. Yet, the Loughrans say the reward for them as a family is just as great. "I think the biggest impact our support will have is on us as a family—feeling the joy of paying back some of the care and kindness that surrounded us during our darkest days," says Lee.

# A local CEO connects good people with a good cause

For Heather Fortner, her first visit to the Aflac Cancer and Blood Disorders Center was a wake-up call. She and her husband, Brian, were in the waiting room with their 1-month-old daughter, Oakley, who was born prematurely and had just undergone a blood transfusion they hoped would save her life.

"I've been scared a lot in my life, but the feeling that day, sitting in that room with families whose children were facing cancer, I think the weight of it all came crashing down on me, realizing that this [outcome] might be very different from what I thought it would be," says Heather.

Fortunately, after months of blood draws and care by a multidisciplinary team at Children's, Oakley's body began responding to the transfusion and began making the red blood cells she was lacking. "We were so fortunate in that moment to have a team that was not only knowledgeable, but also that just loved our little girl," says Heather.

There were other health hurdles as Oakley grew from infant to toddler, but one visit to the hospital last year was especially challenging. "Oakley had salmonella, and we spent five days at Scottish Rite Hospital," says Heather. "She was so sick, and around the third day, she was just done. [Oakley] sat on the floor, sobbing. Then, Child Life Services came in."

Heather says it was this "angel of a human" who showed her, the CEO of a local investment firm, what real leadership looks like. "Her name is India. She sat down on the floor and started talking to Oakley. I thought, 'This is how real leaders lead—meeting people where they are at, courageously sitting in the hard.'"

Entirely donor-funded, our child life specialists provide individualized care and support to help patients cope with the stress of hospitalization and offer unique ways to comfort and motivate them during challenging times. For example, India created a chart for Oakley that rewarded her with animal stickers every time she ate or drank, which were crucial for her recovery. And, because dogs are her favorite, Oakley also got a visit from one of our facility dogs.

***"This place is magic. This place is life," says Heather.***



"I left [Children's] knowing that to whom much is given, much is required, and I just committed then that I would use every available influence or resource that I had at my disposal to ensure that I could connect good people with good hearts to a good cause."

The local wealth management firm, SignatureFD, where Heather is CEO and has worked for over 20 years, selects two organizations each year to support through its corporate philanthropy program, SignatureGIVING. This year, Heather nominated Children's to be the recipient of the firm's generous gift of \$50,000, as well as support from team members who will volunteer at events throughout the year.

"It's a phenomenal way for our team to rally around something that we've all chosen together," says Heather. While most of her team members know her personal connection to Children's, Heather says her family is just one of many that has benefited from the advanced care we provide.

"As an organization, this cause has been top of mind for us," she says. "[Our team has] had several babies in the NICU, two babies had open-heart surgery, and one young family member had an intestinal transplant."

The SignatureFD team brought their family members to participate in the Superhero Sprint 5K, which raises funds to support Strong4Life and recognizes the incredible resiliency of our superhero patients. Kids like Oakley, who is healthy and feisty and eagerly awaiting her own service animal. "We hope one day that Oakley can serve patients with her very own service animal," says Heather. "Sharing that kindness and love of animals with others is what she wants to do."

# A new home for cutting-edge pediatric hematology and oncology care

The Aflac Cancer and Blood Disorders Center is one of the nation's leading pediatric cancer and blood disorders programs. With the opening of the new Arthur M. Blank Hospital in September 2024, we're prepared to provide kids the advanced care they need today—and to meet the healthcare challenges of tomorrow.

Inside this new, state-of-the-art hospital, we have consolidated hematology and oncology services under one roof, which has allowed us to maximize efficiency and streamline care for patients, giving them easy access to one of the largest teams of specialists in the U.S. This 2-million-square-foot facility provides us the infrastructure we need to extend our reach, accelerate vital research and new discoveries, and further our holistic, kid-focused approach to care.

Within three months of opening, the new Aflac Cancer and Blood Disorders Center had:

**7,950**  
outpatient  
visits

**6,940**  
patients  
admitted

**25**  
blood and marrow  
transplants

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Our community partners served **55** meals to approximately **100** families in our care, totaling around **5,000** meals provided.







## Thank you for your ongoing support

We are grateful to have the support of so many who share our commitment to lift up children in need. Together, we've built something remarkable—not with bricks, but with compassion and generosity. Thank you for helping us continue to meet the healthcare needs of kids with cancer and blood disorders.



**Help give every child the lifetime they deserve**