

## New CEO for Pediatric Cancer Research Foundation

By Peter J. Brennan | April 1, 2024



Foundation aims to help all children beat cancer

Officials at Pediatric Cancer Research Foundation say “a revolutionary moment” is occurring, with regards to the newest research to treat children’s cancers. “It’s fantastic research—cutting edge stuff that I’ve never seen before,” Jeri Wilson, who headed the Irvine-based foundation for 12 years, told the Business Journal. “That stuff is sci-fi.”

The foundation on March 20 announced it’s hired as its new chief executive, Danielle

Fragalla, a longtime nonprofit executive who previously worked at foundations for the Children’s Hospital of Orange County, the American Heart Association of Orange County and the City of Hope.

She’s taking over for Wilson, who is stepping into a newly created role of vice president of development, principal gifts.

“I want someone to take us to our next level,” Wilson said about Fragalla.

“I have been raising money in the Orange County community for more than 30 years. It’s the best hardest job that I’ve ever had.”

Fragalla added that “We want to elevate ourselves to same level as the City of Hope and CHOC foundations.

“When this opportunity presented itself, it pulled at my heartstrings. This is an exciting time to be part of the Pediatric Care Foundation.”

### Triple Revenue

The foundation says it has one goal: to make it possible for all children facing childhood cancers to beat their disease and realize their full potential.

It currently has annual revenue of around \$4 million, which it wants to triple.

During Wilson’s 12 years, the foundation grew from a grassroots charity supporting one medical researcher to providing seed funding at eight of the top 10 children’s hospitals.

Since its founding in 1982, the foundation has granted \$46 million to researchers in pediatric cancer.

Worldwide, 400,000 children are diagnosed with cancer each year, making it the leading cause of death among children. In the U.S., about 1 in every 285 children are diagnosed with cancer before turning 20.

The pair said helping these children is crucial because they are in their growth stages that cancer can harm. However, only 4% of federal government research grants are geared toward children.

The foundation aims to fill a gap in the funding world. For example, to get federal grants of \$1 million to \$3 million, the applicants must have some early research to back up their theses. However, that early research requires funding, which is where the foundation comes in by giving grants for as little as \$30,000 to \$50,000.

“We seed money to postdoctorates who are just getting started in their careers and have innovative ideas but don’t have the funding,” Wilson said.

The nonprofit pointed to two interesting areas that they have funded:

– A diagnostic test for Juvenile Myelomonocytic Leukemia (JMML), a blood cancer that affects young children and is difficult to diagnose and treat. Currently available therapies cure only half of patients, with many children experiencing an aggressive disease course while some patients require minimal treatment at all. Dr. Elliot Stieglitz, a researcher at the University of California San Francisco Benioff Children’s Hospital, developed a test that can stratify patients with newly diagnosed JMML to receive different amounts of therapy depending on how aggressive their leukemia is predicted to be.

– The first-ever vaccine for treating Diffuse Intrinsic Pontine Glioma (DIPG), a devastating pediatric brain cancer typically found in children ages 5-8 years. It has a rapid onset of symptoms over a period of weeks and no known treatment. Dr. Ashley Plant-Fox, a researcher at the Ann & Robert H. Lurie Children’s Hospital of Chicago, created a novel heat shock protein vaccine targeting the fatal pediatric brain tumor.

“I’ve seen significant research” in recent years, Wilson said. “I’m seeing a difference. The innovation is a fantastic part of this job.”