

Spotlight

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Hospital

With Gratitude: Couple Gives Back to Help Others Survive and Thrive

THE BOND BETWEEN ELLA ZGANIACZ AND HER HUSBAND, JACEK, IS DEEP. Immigrants from Poland, they arrived separately in this country almost 40 years ago in their mid-twenties. Ella taught English as a Second Language in Brooklyn, and Jacek studied classical piano at Julliard. Shortly after a friend introduced them, Ella traveled back to Poland to care for her sick father. When she returned to New York, Jacek called, and after two dates he proposed. “It was the best decision I ever made,” he said.

They’ve been inseparable ever since. Jacek performed at Carnegie Hall and other prestigious venues across the U.S. and Poland,

forging a successful career in finance at the same time. He also got his pilot’s license, and nearly twenty years ago became a commercial airline pilot. Partly due to his busy schedule, Jacek and Ella have always texted one another their whereabouts.

In January 2023, Ella let Jacek know that she was on her way home from yoga class. When she hadn’t arrived a half hour later, he knew something was amiss. Jacek called several times but got no answer. He was about to drive to the yoga studio when two police officers knocked on the door.

The officers said Ella was safe, miraculously,

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“My gratitude for my wife’s recovery is beyond my expressing capabilities.”

-Jacek Zganiacz

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but in serious condition. She’d been seen driving erratically on the highway, and somehow her car had come to a stop in a muddy field near an exit ramp. Disoriented, Ella was taken to the local hospital where doctors stabilized her and diagnosed a ruptured brain aneurysm. Within a few hours, she was transferred to Yale New Haven Hospital (YNHH) for highly specialized neurological care overseen by Charles Matouk, MD, Professor of Neurosurgery at Yale School of Medicine and Chief, Neurovascular Surgery at YNHH.

Over the next four weeks, Ella endured multiple complicated procedures and dozens of scans and advanced imaging protocols in the Intensive Care Unit at YNHH. Early on, surgeons installed a temporary drain to relieve a build-up of cerebrospinal fluid. She experienced multiple complications, including a blood clot that threatened to cause amputation of her left arm. Her doctors explained that while Ella’s case wasn’t the most serious in the ICU, it was the most complex, requiring three separate teams of specialists to coordinate the best course of action.

Throughout this stressful and unpredictable period, Jacek’s Catholic faith sustained him, and he spent a lot of time in prayer, often saying to himself, “Even if there is another log on the road to Ella’s recovery, it will be thrown into the fire of hope.”

Ella’s brain had to be re-trained, and her strength rebuilt, to accomplish even basic tasks like walking and participating in conversation. But she was determined, and Jacek spent most of each day by her side, his steadfast love, support, and lighthearted sense of humor putting Ella and her caregiving team at ease.

After a month, Ella was well enough to leave the ICU. She spent a week on a less acute floor



Thanks to Yale New Haven Hospital’s expertise, and Ella’s determination to return to her quality of life before her aneurysm, she and husband Jacek are back to doing what they love together.

at YNHH before being transferred to a local rehabilitation hospital. A week later, when Jacek could finally take her home, she remembered the garage code, a hopeful moment they both recall with a smile.

Ella’s hard work was an inspiration to all throughout her journey. Jacek, too, was confident, “It will take some time, maybe a long time, but the day will come when my wife will be her beautiful self again.” Early on, Jacek was told her recovery might take two years and that Ella might need a wheelchair indefinitely. Ella had a different idea. She recovered—physically and cognitively—in three months and has

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walked unassisted ever since.

Now, life has returned to normal, though Ella still has no memory of the accident or her six weeks in the hospital. She looks after their beloved cats, volunteers, and travels near and far to visit family and friends. Ella and Jacek are members of the YNHH Patient and Family Advisory Council, where they share insights on their experience. The YNHH commitment to

care for the whole family, not just the patient, made a positive difference for this couple.

Ella and Jacek also give generously to fund training and education of medical professionals at YNHH and to express their overwhelming gratitude for the exceptional care that saved Ella's life—**care that's not available in their home country, but is standard at Yale New Haven Hospital.** ♥




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When the world turns upside down, there is always a choice in how we respond.

SAMANTHA AND JEFF DORMAN WERE BUSY AND LOVING PARENTS to their two daughters, eagerly anticipating the arrival of their third. Toward the end of Sam's pregnancy, the couple's youngest daughter, Harper, then two years old, began to exhibit signs of serious illness. It took multiple doctor visits over six weeks, and a change of pediatricians, to receive a diagnosis: Acute Lymphoblastic Leukemia.

That first week in the hospital was challenging, as Harper received chemotherapy and the family acclimated to life at Yale New Haven Children's Hospital (YNHCH). Sam and Jeff learned that while food was provided to patients, it was not provided to parents or caregivers staying with their child. Despite many trips to the cafeteria, Sam lost weight, a great concern due to her late-stage pregnancy.

About a month into Harper's treatment, Sam gave birth to Madison—a beautiful, happy, and healthy child. It was a joyful moment for the family that was short lived. The very next day, Harper was re-admitted to the hematology/oncology floor at YNHCH. This time, Jeff stayed at the hospital with Harper, and Sam stayed home to care for their oldest daughter, Olivia, and their newborn, Madison.

Harper was at the beginning of a long road. She was in and out of the hospital, sometimes for days, sometimes for a month. Jeff was at her side, eating and sleeping as best he could in the hospital setting. He recalls the steep learning curve required to navigate the logistics of caring for a critically ill child, as well as the profound shift in his and Sam's world view—children get



Jeff and Samantha established the Parent Plate Program so that parents on the hematology/oncology unit would have meals and snacks available, allowing them to stay by their children's bedside when they're needed most.

cancer; *our child has cancer*. It was a difficult time for the entire family, yet they persevered.

The couple learned quickly about leukemia, how to best care for their daughter, and about day-to-day life in the hospital. They noticed that being well-nourished made a big difference in their ability to advocate for their daughter and interact with her healthcare team. Their options were to visit the hospital cafeterias or order delivery from local restaurants, both of which required them to leave Harper's bedside.

As an alternative, they could purchase a tray that was delivered to Harper's room by Food and Nutrition. Jeff took advantage of this program,

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← **The Dorman sisters,** Madison, Olivia and Harper, are happy their family is doing something positive for others at YNHCH.

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but it added a financial burden, magnifying the emotional and mental stress he was already carrying. Still, with access to daily meals, he had one less distraction. Jeff recalls, “Everything seemed more manageable when I started my day with an omelet and a cup of coffee.” And with that, the idea for the Feeding Families Foundation began to take shape.

Fueled by their determination to transform their family’s experience into positive action, Jeff and Sam moved quickly, “We wanted to help other families make a difficult situation just a little bit better.” They worked with the development team



↪ **The Parent Plate Program** at YNHCH provides food for parents so that they don’t need to leave their kids to visit the cafeteria or order delivery.

at Yale New Haven Hospital to set up a restricted fund that pays for meals for families; they filed paperwork to incorporate their new nonprofit; and they received tax-exempt status promptly—not an easy undertaking!

In January 2024, they launched the Parent Plate Program at YNHCH, offering parents of children on the hematology/oncology unit one free meal per day. Five months later, they expanded to two meals per day. They stock a supply of healthy snacks and provide cakes for birthdays and other big occasions for children and families. And recently they’ve begun partnering with a number of local restaurants to provide food for families on a regular basis, including pizzas (with the help of New Haven Pizza Club) on Friday nights from Modern Apizza. Plans are underway to expand the program in Connecticut, and possibly beyond.

Sam and Jeff are grateful for the opportunity to serve others facing similar circumstances. Their generosity impacts not only the parents they help to feed, but also their sick children, the doctors and nurses who care for them, and the many partners who support this important work. “After all we’ve been through, everything Harper has been through, it feels good to make a difference!” says Jeff. Olivia, Harper, and Madison agree!

The Feeding Families Foundation is supported by a growing number of donors and sponsors. More information is available on their website at www.feedingfamiliesfoundation.org. ♥

The Parent Plate Program

THESE ARE A COUPLE OF MANY SIMILAR SHARED EXPERIENCES FROM FAMILIES who call the hospital their second home. This would not be possible without the support of our community. The Parent Plate Program is not only delivering meals but also delivering hope and raising spirits to those who are experiencing a parent's worst nightmare—a critically ill child. Together, we can help these parents get back to what matters most—caring for their child.

Above providing medical care to my patients, a large part of my role is emotional support, education, and comfort. The relief that Feeding Families Foundation has brought to my patients and their families is indescribable. Being able to provide late night snacks, birthday cake celebrations, and daily meals means so much.

- Marissa, RN, pediatric hematology/oncology

Your foundation has been a literal life saver for us. We are on day 55 of our hospital stay, with no clear timeline to get home. I cannot imagine how we would've managed meals and that cost if it wasn't for Feeding Families. So, THANK YOU!!!

- Courtney, parent



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