



**KRISTEN**  
AND SF GIANTS  
CATCHER  
**BUSTER POSEY**

ARE MAKING GOOD ON  
THEIR COMMITMENT TO  
CONQUER PEDIATRIC  
CANCER THROUGH  
DONATIONS, HOSPITAL  
VISITS AND FUNDRAISING.

BY JULIE VALLONE

**ALL  
STAR  
CANCER ACTIVISTS**

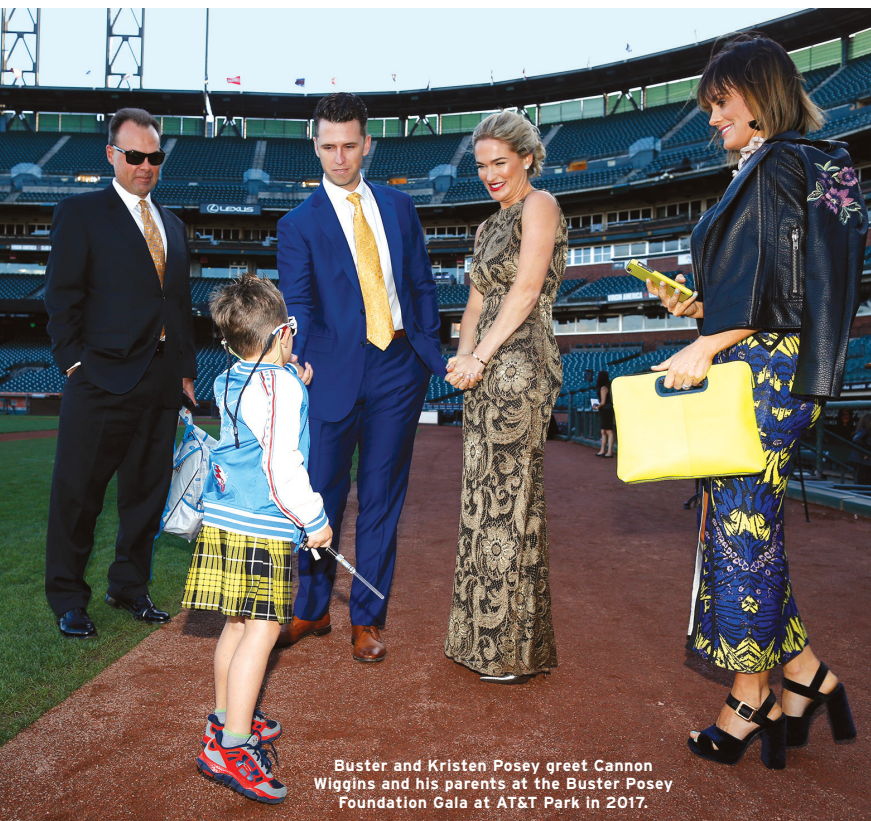
Three years ago, Kristen Posey came across an online story about Cannon Wiggins, a 5-year-old who had been struggling with cancer for most of his life. At 20 months, Cannon had been diagnosed with neuroblastoma, a type of cancer that starts in the nerve tissue and commonly affects babies and young children.

ANDY KUNO/S.F. GIANTS

Reading about Cannon's suffering and his parents' anguish, Kristen was deeply moved. She and her husband, San Francisco Giants star Buster Posey, have twins, Lee and Addison, who are just a few days younger than Cannon.

The story compelled Kristen to get in touch with Cannon's mother, Melissa Wiggins. Kristen told her that she couldn't believe what Cannon was going through and that she wanted to learn more. Eventually, the two started an email conversation, and while they had never met in person, they soon became friends.

"She was very candid about what they faced with trying to save their son's life," says Kristen. "She opened the door for me. I wanted to help, and pulled Buster in with me. I told him this was what I wanted to focus on for our philanthropic efforts."



Buster and Kristen Posey greet Cannon Wiggins and his parents at the Buster Posey Foundation Gala at AT&T Park in 2017.

Fast-forward a couple of years, and Kristen and Buster Posey have managed to raise more than \$788,000 for pediatric cancer research. They now also make monthly visits to local hospitals, delighting young cancer patients throughout the Bay Area with their kindness, generosity and dazzling star power.

"These kids and families are going through a really tough time, and we feel lucky that we get to spend some time with them," notes Buster. "I am always amazed at the calmness and resiliency that so many of them show."

### THE REALITY OF PEDIATRIC CANCER

In addition to their conversations, another big influence on Kristen was a book Melissa had written on her family's experiences helping Cannon battle cancer. Melissa called it *Thank You for the Fight* because some kids don't even have the option to fight their

cancer. The book is written like a series of blog posts reflecting what was going on with Cannon as it all happened. That included several rounds of chemotherapy and at least three surgeries, one being a 13-hour operation where he was placed on life support. He also had a stem cell transplant, radiation and immunotherapy.

Melissa's book goes beyond describing these difficult events to share the emotional journey that she and her husband endured watching their son go through them. "It was pretty raw, but at the time, it was really good because it allowed me to get out and share what pediatric cancer really looks like. It's not the balloons and smiley faces and the cupcakes," Melissa says.

Melissa also runs a foundation, called Cannonball Kids, which has raised more than \$1 million for clinical trials. The group has thus far funded at least nine trials, and Melissa travels the country looking for others to support.

After Kristen read *Thankful for the Fight*, she told Melissa, "I want to do more than contribute money for pediatric cancer; I want to help you change it."

Over the course of their conversations, one of the issues that really struck Kristen was that only 4 percent of government research dollars go to pediatric cancer.

"I never knew about the lack of funding it received," she explains, "and because that's so low, they've been using treatments made for adults. But these are kids; their little bodies can't take that kind of treatment."

She says that as a result, young patients experience many more side effects. In Cannon's case, for instance, he lost some teeth and some of his hearing, and he won't be able to father children.

"With better treatments, maybe the things that happened to Cannon won't happen to other kids someday," says Kristen, adding that some children don't even have the option to undertake or continue treatments. "That's just not OK, so we're trying to change that."

### GETTING BUSTER ON BOARD

Through her conversations with Melissa, Kristen determined that she and Buster were in a good position to help these families. However, she confides that getting Buster behind the idea, at least initially, wasn't such an easy sell.

"When I first approached Buster with it, he said, 'I can't look at that. It's just too painful to read about.' I wanted him to read *Thankful for the Fight*, but knew it was really tough to look at those images," she recalls.

"I was hesitant at first because I didn't know if I could handle seeing kids that sick," Buster says. "It's much easier to look away when it is not affecting you directly." But eventually, he came around. "In talking to Kristen, I realized that I had to view my platform as a blessing to hopefully bring a little happiness to a child's day," he says.

Before taking on this challenging mission, the Poseys wanted to learn as much as they possibly could about pediatric cancer and the path to changing its funding situation. They decided to pay a visit to Dr. Mignon Loh at UCSF Benioff Children's Hospital, who has been at the forefront of this research for years.

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“When I first found out I was going to meet with her, I was pretty intimidated,” Kristen recalls. “This lady is brilliant, and here I am, just wanting to help out in any way I can, so I didn’t even know if I should open my mouth. I was worried she was going to think I’m an idiot. But she was just so kind. She has been amazing to get to know.”

In addition to the couple’s success raising much-needed funds, Dr. Loh also sees great value in the work the Poseys have done to support the kids spiritually, especially through their ongoing monthly visits to the hospitals.

“I mean, yes, we give medicines, we give antibiotics, we give chemotherapy, but that doesn’t say anything about the power of an emotional visit and an inspiration for a kid to say, ‘Wow! They came to visit me, and I’m going to do my best to get better because maybe someday I can be out there with them.’ I mean, that’s huge,” said Dr. Loh in a foundation video.

#### A BALLPARK GALA

After spending a year visiting hospitals and learning more about pediatric cancer, the Poseys officially announced their commitment to fighting the disease in the spring of 2016. To get started, the couple joined forces with ESPN basketball sportscaster Dick Vitale, who has helped raised millions for The V Foundation, an organization that has been working to find a cure for cancer since 1993.

In September 2016, the couple hosted a gala at AT&T Park introducing the Buster and Kristen Posey Fund. It seemed only natural to invite Cannon and his family to the event, and Kristen and Melissa finally met in person.

Cannon, who was having a blast meeting the players and running the bases on the field, had also seen other parts of his life take a turn for the better. He had been declared NED (no evidence of disease), but because neuroblastoma has a tendency to come back, he continued chemotherapy for a while afterward. On this night, after 3½ years of treatment, he was ready to take his last chemotherapy dose, which consisted of four pills that he swallowed right on the field, in the company of his parents, the Poseys, Vitale and others at the gala.

Since then, the Poseys’ foundation has raised nearly \$800,000 for the cause and is still going strong. The gala provided the main

source of funds, along with Toyota’s donation of a truck and sales of a special Giants cap designed by New Era. It features a gold ribbon for pediatric cancer awareness, and part of the proceeds from the cap sales support pediatric cancer research.

Cannon and his family came out to San Francisco again this September, when the Poseys helped him celebrate his first year without chemotherapy and other treatments.

#### WINNING FANS IN THE WARDS

Both Kristen and Buster continue to make their monthly visits to pediatric cancer wards throughout the Bay Area, where they meet



Buster and Kristen Posey welcome the attendees at the Buster Posey Foundation Gala.

the kids, learn about their illnesses and other challenges and pass out gifts like signed hats, blankets and T-shirts.

During their visits, the Poseys get a firsthand view of patients’ experiences battling their cancers. And naturally, when you’re a



## CHILDHOOD CANCER: FACTS AND FIGURES

After accidents, cancer is the second leading cause of death for children ages 1-14. Yet it only receives 4 percent of government dollars that go toward cancer research. Other facts on pediatric cancer:

- Each year, about 175,000 children ages 14 and younger are diagnosed with cancer worldwide.
- About 420,000 childhood cancer survivors live in the U.S., with many more around the world.
- Leukemias, which are cancers of the bone marrow and blood, are the most common childhood cancers.
- Most childhood cancer patients will have chronic medical conditions from treatment.
- The FDA recently approved the first gene therapy treatment for childhood leukemia that uses patients' genetically altered immune cells to fight the disease. The move is said to have major positive ramifications for patients with cancer as well as other diseases.
- Thanks to better therapies, more than 80 percent of U.S. childhood cancer patients now become long-term survivors.

Sources: American Cancer Society, St Jude Children's Research Hospital, *The Washington Post*, *The Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)*.



Buster Posey plays ball with the kids at Family House in San Francisco.

MICHAEL URAKAMI/S.F. GIANTS (2)

# Kristen learned that federal funding targeted to pediatric oncology accounted for only 4 percent of government research dollars.

kid talking to a World Series champion and five-time All Star and the 2012 National League MVP, the conversation is often going to turn to baseball, or at least sports. “We usually talk about the sports that they like to play, and how we hope they can make it out to a Giants game soon,” says Buster.

The kids are invited to attend Giants games when they are healthy enough to go, and there they get to meet some of the other players and even to go out onto the field.

Kristen says that the couple’s monthly hospital visits have had a big impact on her and Buster, and while all of the kids have compelling stories, some of them stand out more than others.

“One little boy not too long ago had a mouth full of sores from all the treatment, so he couldn’t talk to us. The only way he could communicate was through a thumbs-up. That was really tough to see,” she recalls.

“Then there was one little girl we met a year ago who was pretty sick at the time, but when we saw her a couple of weeks ago, she had a head full of hair with bows in it, and she came up and gave me a hug. It was nice to see that she was doing really well.”

The Poseys are also able to interact with the parents during these visits and learn more about how the children’s illnesses are affecting the rest of their families.

“It’s tough to put yourself in their parents’ shoes, to think about what they’re going through,” Kristen says. “Their strength is pretty incredible, the way they’re fighting for their kids.”

The Poseys haven’t taken their own kids along with them on these visits, but they do take them to meet children visiting the ballpark and have also brought them to Family House. The organization provides temporary housing to families of sick kids receiving treatment at the University of California San Francisco Benioff Children’s Hospital.

“Our son enjoys going around and talking to the kids there and at the games,” says Kristen. “I hope we’re teaching them that there’s more to life than just meeting our needs. Trying to help people is what it’s all about.”

“I think that it has made us closer as a family,” Buster adds. “Kristen and I want our children to grow up and understand how important it is to help one another. They are still pretty young, but I think they are starting to understand why we do this.”

“We want them to learn that you can impact someone by simply giving them a pat on the back when they are having a tough

day. Hopefully, they will grow and learn how rewarding and fulfilling it is to put others first.”

Melissa Wiggins couldn’t be more impressed with her new friends and their willingness to pursue such a challenging endeavor.

“I think they’re amazeballs,” she says of the Poseys. “They have a platform that the regular Joe doesn’t have, and they’re using it.



Dick Vitale (left) joins Buster and Kristen Posey as they visit pediatric cancer patients at UCSF Benioff Children’s Hospital San Francisco.

It’s painful and exhausting, but they’re taking that on. Unlike other problems worldwide that seem out of reach, pediatric cancer can actually be fixed if the right research is funded.”

The Poseys are determined to bring pediatric cancer out of the shadows and work toward that fix.

“Unless it affects your family or your neighbor, it’s one of those things that’s pretty easy to ignore. But once you get closer and learn more about it, it’s about impossible to ignore,” says Kristen. “No donation is too small to get something accomplished.”

To learn more about Buster and Kristen Posey’s work to fight childhood cancer, visit [busterposeyofficial.com](http://busterposeyofficial.com). ■