

Hope for Henry, a DC-Based National Children's Patient Program, Adds Vaccine Toolkit to Make Kids' Shots a Little Easier

Fran Kritz

A new program from Hope for Henry, a D.C.-based organization created to make hospital stays and outpatient visits easier for kids, has added a vaccine toolkit that parents can use to take some of the “ouch” out of those needed injections.

Laurie Strongin founded Hope for Henry with her husband, Allen Goldberg, in 2003, a year after their son, Henry, died of a rare genetic disorder, Fanconi's Anemia, at age 8.

Strongin and her husband both grew up in the Washington suburbs. Allen Goldberg attended Har Shalom, where he had his Bar Mitzvah, and was president of Kadima and USY and a camper at Camp Tel Shalom. Strongin had her Bat Mitzvah and was confirmed at Temple Sinai, and their parents were board members of their respective synagogues.

The family belongs to Adas Israel Congregation, and their three sons, Henry, Jack and Joe, attended Gan HaYeled at Adas and the Jewish Primary Day School (now Milton Gottesman Jewish Day School.)

Strongin says the family has a friend group of parents they first met when all their children were at the Gan at Adas in the 90s and have stayed close ever since. “We have a set tradition of meals and breaking the fast ... we always host lunch on the first day of Rosh Hashanah at our house.”

Until recently, Hope for Henry focused on in-patient hospital programs, but Strongin says they added vaccine help for parents because “the urgent need for widespread vaccinations against COVID-19 brought kids' fear of needles to center stage.” Strongin says that whether a COVID-19 vaccination, flu shot, or scheduled childhood vaccination, needle phobia and vaccine hesitancy can make routine healthcare visits time-consuming, tense and traumatic.

The toolkit includes tips for what to say to kids ahead of getting a vaccine and how to hold younger children during a shot. It also has a game board, available online or at some doctors' offices, that lets kids follow the process, from check-in to post-vaccine bandage, for getting a vaccination.



Strongin created Hope for Henry after her son's many hospital stays. “For the past twenty years, we have become the pioneer in creating tools to help kids, parents and healthcare professionals navigate the scariest and most painful medical procedures at our nation's leading children's hospitals,” Strongin said. Hope for Henry has programs, including birthday parties and incentives, to help kids prepare for procedures such as MRIs and for hospitalized kids in 38 hospitals around the country. Locally, the programs are at Children's National and Georgetown Hospital in D.C., Inova in Northern Virginia and Sinai Hospital in Baltimore.

The vaccine toolkit is Hope for Henry's first outpatient program and Strongin said that “it's so exciting for us to bring our innovative, evidence-based program outside the hospital walls to help not just the sickest kids get better, but to keep all kids healthy. Vaccination rates are on the decline and we're proud to provide one solution that will be helpful toward reversing this troubling trend.”

The toolkit was piloted locally at Giant pharmacies, health departments and hospitals, and launched nationwide this summer. The organization says at least 34,000 kids and their parents have had an easier, less stressful vaccination experience because of the toolkit. “What sorcery was this?” wrote one parent. “My kid was

unhinged with their first vaccine. With Hope for Henry's program, they now can sit on their own and get it done.”

Hope for Henry has expansion in its sights for its hospital-based program, with plans to increase to 100 hospitals around the U.S. from the current 38 by 2026.

Strongin says that the motivation behind Hope for Henry was “ensuring that parents and kids who came after us and had to endure what we did would have a better experience and hopefully a better outcome.”

“Henry was a champion at so many things, including, sadly, being a patient. He spent so much time in the hospital that he excelled there just as he did being a big brother, creating strong friendships, playing soccer, or setting up a lemonade stand in front of our house, she said.”

Several years ago, Strongin published a book about her son, “Saving Henry,” and described her delightful son this way: “He remained upbeat throughout it all, carrying to each appointment the sword that Papa Sy [my dad, of blessed memory] had given him. As the nurses prepared to take yet another sample of blood or insert an IV, Henry would hold that sword tight, stick it high in the air and exclaim, ‘Let's get it over with and out of here.’ The nurses would burst into giggles and have to take a moment to compose themselves before inserting the needle.”

Throughout Henry's illness, Strongin and her husband would give Henry a Batman action figure as a reward for doing the hard things he needed to do. “It worked and it is that idea that informed our development of Hope for Henry's program, which has been refined over time, with science, by professionals into a high impact approach to improving the pediatric patient experience and outcomes.”

Henry's birthday is Oct. 25, and each year the families of Henry's friends from Gan HaYeled and Milton join Strongin, Goldberg and their sons for dinner. This year, Henry would have been 28. ■

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