

*Sometimes, the hardest part about being a parent is, well, being a parent.*

## **Celebrate the life you are given: Gunner's Story**

By Amy Blum

What makes a child normal? Is it the rate at which he reaches pediatrician-approved milestones on the developmental chart? Or, the way he dresses? Maybe where he lives?

For anyone who knows eight-year-old Gunner Olesen of Chamberlain, the answer to that question is easy. A "normal" child wraps you around his finger with an infectious smile. He warms your heart with genuine laughter. He speaks to you from the depths of his soul through the windows in his eyes.

A "normal" child captivates your heart and makes you want to champion for his victory.

By those definitions, Gunner is one of the most "normal" children in the community.

"Gunner is the happiest kid I've ever seen," his mom Leslie said. "He loves music. He adores his pony and goats. Our black lab Wilson won't leave that little boy's side. Every day is Gunner's favorite day. He is just contagious."

While Gunner is a normal little boy in all the ways that count, his story is far from typical.

### **The First Diagnosis**

Just over eight years ago, ultrasounds and routine prenatal care indicated Leslie and Kevin Olesen could look forward to the healthy arrival of their first child. Upon welcoming Gunner to the world, their doctor broke some shocking news.

The couple's beloved son was born with Trisomy 22, a chromosome disorder where there are three copies of chromosome 22 rather than two. Though there are varying degrees of Trisomy 22 afflictions, the gut-wrenching fact for the Olesens was that they had a very sick little boy.

"I remember the doctor wanting to talk to me about these abnormalities with my son," Leslie recalled. "I was so far in denial though. I just couldn't figure out why they were talking to me about this stuff. To me, there was nothing wrong with my baby."

Gunner's diagnosis required 17 weeks in Sanford's Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU) and multiple surgeries. The new parents' denial and grief was often overwhelming, but the family would not be broken.



*Eight-year-old Gunner Olesen of Chamberlain adores music, shares his smile freely and finds special joy in his dog Wilson and his Granny Marge Gunter. Olesen was born with the chromosomal disorder Trisomy 22 and was recently diagnosed with cancer. However, the diagnoses don't define the boy. Instead, his mom Leslie says Gunner is "the happiest kid ever" and should remind people "do not judge others for any reason" because you could miss out on a beautiful gift.*

“There was surgery after surgery. Every time we turned around, he [Gunner] was sick. It was all so hard to accept,” Leslie said. “Then, one day I just woke up. I knew right there that crying wouldn’t make anything any better. I had to get up, get going and be the mom Gunner deserved.”

With their trademark strength, Leslie and Kevin vowed to live each day well and make adjustments when necessary. As a veteran nurse, Leslie quickly accommodated feeding tubes and medical equipment in the family’s home.

Thanks to his family’s devotion and an outstanding medical team, Gunner flourished.

The family enjoyed camping, boating, working cattle with friends and every other “normal” activity for many families in the Chamberlain area. In August 2013, Gunner eagerly started school as a second-grader at Chamberlain Elementary.

“Gunner absolutely loves school,” Leslie said. “He’s really like any other little kid in school. He just makes some adjustments that not all kids need.”

### **Facing Cancer**

The family continued living their normal life. Kevin went to work for the city. Leslie went to work at the hospital. Gunner went to school. Then, Leslie noticed her contagiously happy little boy “just didn’t seem right.”

“I couldn’t put my finger on what was wrong, but I knew something just wasn’t right,” Leslie said. “He was making sounds I hadn’t heard before. He seemed a little whiney. Something just wasn’t right.”

On April 16, Kevin and Leslie received a stunning blow. Gunner was diagnosed with cancer—Acute Lymphocytic Leukemia (ALL). Thankfully, the cancer had not spread to Gunner’s spinal fluid; however, the diagnosis meant three years of chemotherapy treatments.

“At least for the first year, we’ll have at least weekly trips to Sioux Falls for chemo. After that, I should be able to administer the chemo at home,” Leslie said. “I’m comfortable with all the nurse stuff. I’m really working on just being ‘Gunner’s mommy’ though.”

Because of Trisomy 22, the family faces unique challenges in Gunner’s journey.

“You know, he can’t tell us what hurts or what’s wrong, and we can’t tell him he has cancer,” Leslie said. “So, we tell him he’s sick, and we’re working to make him better. Then, I make up all sorts of crazy songs and stories until he looks at me and laughs. We’re going to be okay. We’re strong.”

### **Accepting Help**

Upon hearing Gunner’s diagnosis, the Olesen’s Sanford family sprang into action. Leslie’s close friends and co-workers Patty Juhnke and Christy Graves rallied with many others to organize a bake sale at the Sanford Care Center on April 26.

In less than two hours, six tables full of goodies were gone, and the group raised just over \$4,000 to help the Olesen family with growing expenses.

“This event was such a testament to what small town folks do! We help each other however we can,” said Erica Peterson, CEO at Sanford Chamberlain Medical Center. “As for Sanford, family is what makes

us able to be in the business of caring for others. Kevin, Gunner and Leslie are part of our family, and it warms my heart to see everyone pull together for Gunner.”

Leslie and Kevin view cancer as a “bump in the road” for their family. While they have no expectations from others, the community’s generosity is not lost on the Olesens.

“We are gonna have a tough three years ahead of us,” Leslie said. “But, we are certain we will get through this with the love and support of our family, friends and the great folks at Sanford Children’s. We have to make the best of it all, and go on. We will get through this. We are strong!”