

San Diegan's good deeds will get an All-Star salute

Foundation assists children with cancer

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Richard Nares of San Diego will be honored at baseball's All-Star Game for the foundation he began after his son, Emilio, died of leukemia. (Laura Embry / U-T) -

Online: Read the U-T's 2004 profile of Nares at uniontrib.com/more/nares

See more of People magazine's All-Stars at peopleallstars.com

For six years, Richard Nares has been helping children who have cancer and their families, working in his own quiet way with little fanfare.

Now the trumpets are blowing.

First Lance Armstrong mentioned him on Twitter. Then he got to sit in the broadcast booth at Petco Park with Tony Gwynn. Yesterday he learned he'll be featured in People magazine when it hits newsstands tomorrow.

And Tuesday, on one of the sports world's biggest stages – Major League Baseball's All-Star Game – he'll be saluted by President Barack Obama.

"It's been like a dream," Nares said.

It all started with a nightmare.

Almost nine years ago, he and his wife, Diane, lost their only child to leukemia. Emilio was 5.

They started a nonprofit foundation that focuses on everyday basics that can feel like insurmountable hurdles when a child is seriously ill. Transportation. Food. Information.

"They know what we're feeling, what we've been through," Kathy Jackson of Oak Park said of the Nareses. "What they do makes a huge difference." Jackson's 15-year-old son, Stefon Harris, is in remission with aplastic anemia.

Nares, 56, said he still remembers how scared he felt when Emilio was diagnosed, how frantic he was for answers, how desperate he was for hope. And how touched he was when family, friends and even strangers offered support.

"You're stressed all the time," he said. "You're just lost."

Early on, the Emilio Nares Foundation was mostly just him, working out of his Mission Hills home. If somebody needed a ride to a clinic for treatment, he was the driver. If they needed someone to play video games with a sick teen in the hospital, he played.

His wife's income from a wine-importing business enabled him to quit his work as a picture framer and do what he felt Emilio was calling him to do.

"It's a continuing conversation I have with him," Nares said. "Whenever I'm helping a family, I can hear him: 'Dad you're doing great work.' It's a comfort to me. It's healing."

Funded by donations and grants, the foundation now spends about \$200,000 a year to help about 2,000 people with things ranging from snacks to rent checks. It has three full-time workers, including Nares, and four part-time.

The centerpiece program, Ride With Emilio, uses two vans to pick up children at their homes and take them to medical appointments, then back home. It can make a huge difference for families that might otherwise miss appointments or have to take draining, hours-long journeys on public transportation.

"No sick child should have to ride the bus," Nares said.

The recent wave of attention for his efforts stems from a new program, All-Stars Among Us, sponsored by Major League Baseball and People magazine.

Nominations were solicited throughout the country, and three finalists were chosen for each of the league's 30 teams.

Online voting determined the winners. Nares said his campaign got a boost when Armstrong, the bike racer and cancer survivor, backed him on Twitter. Nationwide, 750,000 people voted in the contest. Nares came in first in San Diego.

"It's been a great experience recognizing these ordinary people who are by no means ordinary, to turn our spotlight onto them and celebrate the great things they do everyday," said Jacqueline Parkes, baseball's chief marketing officer.

The 30 winners will be saluted on the field in pre-game ceremonies at the All-Star Game, being held this year in St. Louis. Five of them will be highlighted in a seven-minute video, each introduced by one of the five living U.S. presidents.

Obama, who has stressed the importance of public service and will throw out the game's first pitch, is the one who will pay tribute to Nares.

"I'm overwhelmed by all this, but it's not why we do what we do," Nares said. "We all have an obligation to help people. So it's the work that's being done that makes me the happiest."

But something else comes close.

When Emilio was in Boston for treatment near the end of his life, they saw runners outside the hospital window. Nares told his son they would come back one day and run the Boston Marathon.

He didn't know it then, but you have to qualify for the Boston Marathon by running fast enough in an earlier race. Several times, at the Rock 'n' Roll Marathon in San Diego, Nares came up short.

This year, he joined a training team and beat the qualifying time by 55 seconds. He said he'll be in Boston in April.

"I get to keep my promise."