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A Bereaved Mother's Gift

After losing her son to cancer and husband to suicide, Valerie Sobel helps parents of sick children afford to be where they are needed most—at their child's side

A photograph of Valerie Sobel, a woman with short, curly red hair, sitting on a large, grey rock. She is wearing a light-colored, long-sleeved button-down shirt, a gold necklace, and light-colored trousers. She is looking directly at the camera with a slight smile. Behind her is a white chapel with a dark roof and a steeple. The chapel has a circular window and a wooden door. The background shows green trees and a clear blue sky.

The day a child is diagnosed, a family can fall apart," says Valerie Sobel (left, by the chapel she built in memory of her late husband and son in Mountain Center, Calif.).

In the space of a year, Valerie Sobel endured more grief than most people experience in a lifetime. First, she watched her witty, 18-year-old son, Andre, go blind, lose his ability to speak, and die of a brain tumor. Then on Jan. 4, 1996, just shy of the first anniversary of Andre's death, Sobel's husband of 26 years, Los Angeles attorney Erwin Sobel, shot himself in the head. In his suicide note, he said he couldn't bear to outlive his son. The double loss, Sobel says, was a "dark night of the soul."

In the years that followed, Sobel, whose family survived the Holocaust, found she couldn't shake a certain memory: In the hospital room next to Andre was a 12-year-old boy with cancer, alone. When she asked why, he replied that his mother was back home in another state, caring for his three siblings. The Sobels were affluent, and Valerie could afford to remain by her son's side from diagnosis to death. "It took me a long time to realize how privileged I was to have been able to be there with my son," she says. "I did not have to dilute my life for one moment to wonder, how am I going to keep a roof over my head?"

That realization gave a new direction to Sobel's shattered life. With \$10 million inherited from her husband, Sobel, now 66, set up the Andre Sobel River of

Life Foundation in 2000. Its purpose: to help parents of gravely ill and dying children be with their offspring and not worry about financial ruin. And that's a real concern for many families of the roughly 500,000 U.S. kids with life-threatening conditions—from cystic fibrosis to cancer—many of whom do not have the money or the ability to take time off work to care for their children. "I've personally seen families lose their homes, bitter divorces, cars repossessed, jobs lost, bank accounts wiped out," says Ann Armstrong-Dailey, founding director of Children's Hospice International in Alexandria, Va.

When 5-year-old Noah Benchek was diagnosed with a brain tumor in 2004, his parents, Kristina and Robert, dropped everything to be at his bedside. They left their jobs—he was an electrical contractor; she ran a home-based business—and stowed Noah's 3-year-old brother with an aunt. The emotional and financial stress was so intense that as Noah underwent surgery and then endured radiation therapy, emotions erupted. "Once, my husband and I were arguing, and I threw dinner at him," says Kristina, 36, of Lompoc, Calif.

At the end of their first nonworking month, the Bencheks found they could not make a \$1,500 mortgage payment; a social worker at the hospital suggested they contact Valerie Sobel. The foundation paid their mortgage and bought the family groceries. Noah was declared cancer free and the Bencheks' marriage survived. "When they paid that July mortgage, we had not left the hospital for a month," Kristina Benchek recalls. "It gave us a sense that we could focus our energy where it needed to be."

That gift was a fraction of the \$3.7 million Sobel's fund has given away to 2,700 families, all within 24 hours of hearing about a case. Networking through social workers at hospitals across the country, Sobel runs a kind of anti-bureaucracy. Parents fill out a simple application that requires no proof of income. Bills are then paid directly to the banks, utilities and businesses where the money is owed. And that was a godsend for Cassie Sargent, a single mom, whose son C.J. was diag-



"Your whole life is turned upside-down," says Kristina Benchek of caring for son Noah during his treatment for brain cancer.

nosed with nasopharyngeal cancer in 2004 at the age of 15. During his three-month hospitalization, Sargent took off from her job as a customer-service rep. She fell behind on her rent and car payments and could barely afford gas to drive herself 220 miles from her home in Reno to the hospital in San Francisco. She looked up Sobel on the Internet and fired off a desperate plea. Sobel replied within hours, and the foundation then paid Sargent's monthly costs, between \$3,000 and \$4,000, for three months.

"She just took charge, a total fairy godmother," says Sargent, 41. C.J., now 18, has recovered after complications from surgery to remove the cancer. He remembers the change in his mother after Sobel began to help. "She wasn't stressed about money and always talking on the phone. She could spend more time taking care of me. That made me feel a lot better."

Helping parents like Sargent is what Sobel says is most satisfying to her after a life that has had more than its share of tragedy. "Pain unites us," she says. "These are all my sisters and I am theirs."

By **Nina Burleigh**. With **Caroline Howard** in New York City and **Sandra Marquez** in Mountain Center, Calif.

"We can't change the outcome. I hope we can soften their journey" —VALERIE SOBEL



In Their Memory: Erwin and Andre Sobel, 1991.

Know a hero? Send suggestions to **HEROESAMONGUS@PEOPLEMAG.COM** For more information on Sobel's foundation, go to www.andreriveroflife.org