

Choosing Courage

In many ways, Charlize, also known as Charlie, is a typical 16-year-old: She loves her two Bullmastiff dogs, borrows her mom's makeup and clothes, takes the family car—sometimes without permission—and stays out a little too late with friends. “I like getting into trouble,” Charlie shares with a mischievous smile.

Yet, alongside those ordinary teenage moments is a reality no 16-year-old should have to face. Charlie is battling DMG (diffuse midline glioma), an aggressive form of brain cancer. It started last November with neck and shoulder pain. Charlie's parents, Kira and Tim, brought her to an orthopedist, who recommended physical therapy and acupuncture. After a physical therapist noticed concerning weakness in February, an MRI revealed a tumor in Charlie's brain stem and spinal cord. Surgeons removed as much of the tumor as possible before doctors shared the diagnosis. There is no cure.

As Kira discusses the inconceivable turn life has taken, she tears up. Charlie gives her mom an affectionate nudge: “Girl, please do not cry.” When asked why, the teen replies, “You can't be sad all the time.” That positive attitude, strength, and courage have fueled Charlie through six weeks of grueling radiation, as well as physical and occupational therapy to relearn how to hold up her head, move her right side, eat, and walk—basic things she had once done without

Continued on page 3



Charlize Hyser was diagnosed with incurable brain cancer last February. But this feisty Minnesota teen is determined that cancer will never define her.

Working on a Cure

Meet three researchers—all funded through the St. Baldrick's Childhood Cancer Research Foundation—who are working hard to develop more effective treatments for DMG.



Yang Li, PhD
St. Baldrick's Scholar
 Studying disruptions in gene activity that may underlie DMG



Sneha Ramakrishna, MD
St. Baldrick's Research Grant
 Developing new approaches to CAR-T cell immunotherapy for DMG



Monica Pomaville, MD
St. Baldrick's Fellow
 Improving CAR-T cell therapy response through the manipulation of RNA

Double Down

Physician-scientist Babak Moghimi, MD, is harnessing the power of CAR-T cell immunotherapies to advance care for AML (acute myeloid leukemia). His latest research doubles the type of cells targeted—creating a more precise tool against pediatric cancer.



Babak Moghimi, MD

What's your backstory?

I grew up in Iran and started medical school at 18, so I've been practicing medicine for over 20 years. While training at a pediatric hospital I met patients who had severe side effects from their cancer treatments. I wanted to cure them—and learned that cures for some blood and bone marrow cancers are possible through stem cell transplants. That knowledge led me to a career in pediatric hematology and oncology.

It's been a very rewarding journey working with kids who have extremely high-risk diseases, including AML. Families often come to me when all of their hopes and dreams are gone. Treatments have become more personalized and efficient, and we've gotten better at managing toxic side effects that can come with these powerful medicines. While survival rates for pediatric leukemias have drastically improved in recent decades, some kids never reach remission. They'll remain in my heart for the rest of my life.

Tell us more about AML.

AML is a type of pediatric leukemia that causes kids' bodies to produce too many abnormal white blood cells, leaving less room for healthy blood cells. We can help many kids with AML reach remission, but the intense therapies we deliver can have devastating side effects that require long-term management and care. That's because specific mutations enable AML cells to block treatments that are highly effective in treating other leukemias, like ALL (acute lymphoblastic leukemia). The big breakthrough for ALL was a type of immunotherapy called CAR T-cell therapy, which was developed with support from St. Baldrick's and other funders. It uses a protein called CD19 to find and eliminate ALL cancer cells without harming normal tissue. CD19 now cures 95 percent of kids with ALL. It is our golden child of CAR T-cells.

Unfortunately, AML is different. Most AML antigens—the immune receptors on the surface of leukemia cells—are shared by other organs, like the liver, kidneys, and heart. When you target these antigens with the very strong and effective CAR T-cells used in existing immunotherapies, AML finds pathways to escape those immune cells. This means eliminating AML with CAR-T could potentially damage other vital organs. That's why we haven't seen an effective CAR T-cell therapy for AML yet.

How does your research target AML?

Our goal is to eliminate leukemia while protecting normal blood and organ cells from damage. In my lab, we're working on something called a "gated system" for CAR-T, which targets two antigens that AML cells overproduce—CD33 and CD123. It's similar to the "if-then" statements we all used in algebra: If CD33 is present, then go look for CD123 and eliminate only the cells that have both proteins. This creates a logical, biological circuit and an extra layer of protection that statistically reduces the chances of killing healthy cells in other organs. We've perfected this system in lab experiments and now have a new iteration that is more efficient and potent. We also have funding from a manufacturer and are hoping to have FDA approval to begin a local clinical trial by the end of 2027. It's super exciting.

"For AML, a breakthrough hasn't come yet—but I'm hopeful we'll see it within the next five to 10 years."

What's next?

We've come a long way in treating childhood leukemia, but there's so much more work to do. When I started my first pediatric fellowship almost two decades ago, our discussions with parents of children with ALL centered around keeping kids comfortable in their final months and years. Today, that kind of discussion will never happen because we have four different kinds of CAR T-cell therapies to offer for ALL.

For AML, a breakthrough like that hasn't come yet—but I'm hopeful we'll see it within the next five to 10 years. Each step in our research brings us closer to seeing a giant leap forward for AML.

What's your message to St. Baldrick's donors?

I'm very thankful for the support St. Baldrick's has provided throughout my career. The AML clinical trial we hope to launch next year is a direct result of that funding. I believe the most important contribution St. Baldrick's makes is their strong support for early career physician scientists like me, so we don't have to choose between being a clinician or an investigator.

Babak Moghimi, MD, is section head of transplantation and cellular therapy at the Cancer and Blood Disease Institute at Children's Hospital Los Angeles. He earned his medical degree at Tehran University of Medical Sciences and completed his residency at Jackson Memorial Hospital in Miami. Dr. Moghimi also completed fellowships at Children's Hospital Philadelphia and Children's Hospital Los Angeles.

Amplifying Impact

A \$50,000 gift from Houston-based KBR has helped amplify Send Kids' Cancer Packing™, the St. Baldrick's Childhood Cancer Research Foundation's newest signature fundraising program. KBR's generous contribution has helped fuel additional digital advertising and resources to showcase the program to more people, reach new audiences, and inspire more volunteers to take part.



Thanks in part to research funded by St. Baldrick's supporters, many kids now receive a lifesaving leukemia treatment called blinatumomab through a backpack they carry for 28 days—giving them more freedom

to do the things they love while undergoing treatment. Send Kids' Cancer Packing™ asks participants to carry a backpack in solidarity with kids, leading to conversations, awareness, and more funding for research.

St. Baldrick's mission and the high-visibility potential of Send Kids' Cancer Packing™ resonated with officials at KBR, a leading science, technology, and engineering solutions firm. Kayla Esposito, a communication specialist for the company, explains, "We wanted to get involved because this is one of St. Baldrick's most visible programs. Its impact extends over 28 days, creating ongoing opportunities to raise awareness and support. KBR is proud to partner with St. Baldrick's and help amplify Send Kids' Cancer Packing™."

"St. Baldrick's aligns with KBR's core values and it's such a heartfelt cause. There are so many unique ways organizations can advance pediatric cancer research."

Since 2024, KBR has provided significant financial support for St. Baldrick's. Through its KBR Charity Golf Tournament, which is organized by the company's early career professionals group, KBR has contributed \$150,000 to St. Baldrick's so far, supporting Send Kids' Cancer Packing™ and two head-shaving events. This year's 20th annual KBR Charity Golf Tournament on Oct. 19 again benefits St. Baldrick's and 14 other nonprofits. Esposito says, "St. Baldrick's mission aligns with KBR's core values and resonates deeply with our employees. KBR is proud to support St. Baldrick's and the critical work they do to advance childhood cancer research."

Send Kids' Cancer Packing™!

Show your solidarity with kids who shoulder the weight of cancer treatment by participating in Send Kids' Cancer Packing™. You'll carry a backpack for 28 days—just like our kids—to raise awareness and donations to fund pediatric cancer research.



Choosing Courage (continued)



thought. Along the way, there were bouts of frustration and anger, but also humor. In fact, Charlie's hospital rooms became gathering places for family and medical staff who enjoyed the teen's jokes—and sometimes colorful language. Kira recalls, "Charlize had some pretty good one-liners."

Kira credits the care teams at Children's Minnesota and Gillette Children's with helping Charlie to regain her independence. In August, the girl who couldn't hold up her head a few months ago threw out the first pitch at a Minnesota Twins game. "Charlize walking today took an entire village—the incredible teams at Children's and Gillette who pushed, encouraged, challenged, and believed in her over and over again," says Kira.

Despite those successes and others—including returning to school part-time in September—Charlie is now enrolled in a phase one clinical trial investigating an immunotherapy designed to activate her immune system to recognize and attack tumor cells, with the goal of reducing the risk of cancer growing back. So far, her follow-up scans have been stable and side effects have been minimal.

"Research creates options. Options create time. And Charlize and other kids deserve more than time—they deserve a finish line."

But there's no clear roadmap for what comes next. The lack of funding for childhood cancer research and how far behind it remains angers Kira. "Pediatric cancer research is decades behind where it should be," she says. "When Charlize was diagnosed, we didn't sit down with a doctor and hear, 'Here's the treatment plan.' We heard that there is no curative treatment for her cancer. Radiation could buy time. After that, we looked to clinical trials. That is not good enough."

Kira hopes that Charlize's story inspires St. Baldrick's donors to support pediatric cancer research: "Research is what changes things for the next family. I want the next mom sitting in that room to hear a doctor say, 'We have a plan. Here's what we're going to do.' Not, 'There is no treatment.'"

"That's why funding matters. It gives researchers the ability to find the next treatment, doctors something to offer, and kids a chance to have a future. Research creates options. Options create time. And Charlize and other kids deserve more than time—they deserve a finish line."

As she speaks, Kira tears up again. Charlie's gentle response: "Girl, don't cry."

Mighty Mikes

A pair of guys named Mike are fighting back in a big way against pediatric cancer.



It All Adds Up

Dolores Payne once told her son, Mike Payne, that she wanted to help kids with cancer. She never got the chance. Soon after, Dolores was in her own battle with cancer and passed away in 2013. But today, her legacy lives on in regular monthly gifts to the St. Baldrick's Childhood Cancer Research Foundation.

About a year after losing Dolores, Mike was scrolling on Facebook and thinking about his mom's wish. A St. Baldrick's video appeared on his feed. Mike knew this was his chance to fulfill Dolores's dream. After a phone call with St. Baldrick's, Mike set up a monthly \$1,000 gift through his family's company, Northeastern Fence and Supply Corporation in Massachusetts. Today, those monthly gifts total more than \$100,000.

As a business owner, Mike appreciates the ease of monthly giving to a cause he cares about deeply: "Monthly giving has taken the decision making out of supporting St. Baldrick's in a good way. From a business

point of view, it's so simple. It's become a regular part of my budget. We're just a small fence company, but we've made such a big impact. I plan on doing this for the rest of my life because St. Baldrick's is such a worthy cause."

Leaving a Legacy

Mike Tucker first heard about St. Baldrick's at a Georgia Tech baseball game, where several players shaved their heads on the dugout to raise funds for pediatric cancer research. Eighteen years later, Team Spider Monkey—led by Mike and his friend, John Vestal—has raised \$585,806 at annual head-shaving events, currently based at Thos. O'Reilly's Public House in Sandy Springs, Ga. Individually, Mike has shaved 17 times, contributing \$182,962 to St. Baldrick's.

Now, Mike has stepped up his support with a bequest designating a significant percentage of his estate to St. Baldrick's after he passes. A financial technology data

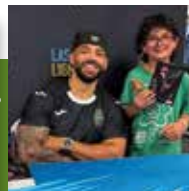
professional, Mike arranged the generous legacy gift after consulting with his financial advisor and attorney to maximize the benefits for his heirs and St. Baldrick's. "It was easy to set up," Mike explains. "You can either designate St. Baldrick's as the beneficiary of your 401k or life insurance policy, or leave a bequest in your will, as I did. It doesn't have to be a high percentage—every little bit helps."

"Pediatric cancer research is so horribly underfunded and St. Baldrick's is trying to close that gap. For me, it's very meaningful to do what I can to help kids with cancer."



Mike Tucker, right, and John Vestal

Let's Connect



 Stbaldricks.org/distinguished-giving

 Stbaldricks.org/get-involved/business

 Stbaldricks.org/monthly-giving

Thank you!

Thank you for supporting lifesaving childhood cancer research. Through your gifts, you are helping the St. Baldrick's Childhood Cancer Research Foundation fund the best childhood cancer research, no matter where it's being done. With \$380 million in research grants in the U.S. funded since 2005, we are the largest charity funder of pediatric cancer research grants. YOU made progress possible!

Ways to Give

Kids with cancer need cures now, and it starts with you. Donate to fund the most promising childhood cancer research. Give once or monthly. Start today: stbaldricks.org/ways-to-give



Scan here to help find a cure!

The St. Baldrick's Childhood Cancer Research Foundation is a volunteer and donor powered charity committed to supporting the most promising research to find cures for childhood cancers and give survivors long and healthy lives.