

Helping Hands

As St. Jude Children's Research Hospital celebrates its 50th anniversary, national outreach director **MARLO THOMAS** talks about continuing her father's legacy of helping kids in need.

WHEN MARLO THOMAS graced the small screen in the 1960s as *That Girl*, she became an icon for single career women everywhere. Since then, the award-winning TV and theater actress has parlayed her success into spotlighting other social issues, authoring books and co-founding the Ms. Foundation for Women, which encourages women to pursue leadership roles. Thomas also tirelessly advocates for St. Jude Children's Research Hospital, established in Memphis, Tenn., in 1962 by her late father, entertainer Danny Thomas, to care for seriously ill children whose families otherwise wouldn't be able to afford treatment. *American Way* caught up with Thomas, St. Jude's national outreach director, as the hospital celebrates 50 years of groundbreaking clinical research and care.

AMERICAN WAY: Why did your father create St. Jude?

MARLO THOMAS: When my dad was a young, struggling entertainer with a baby on the way (me!), he asked for guidance from St. Jude, patron of hopeless cases, because he was feeling pretty hopeless himself. He promised the saint he'd build a shrine in his name if he got a sign he was going in the right direction. The next day he landed a job. He kept his promise by developing a hospital named for the saint that was devoted to studying cancer in children.

AW: When you walk the halls of St. Jude, what touches you most?

MT: The sheer optimism, strength and courage of the children and their parents. When I tour the country for St. Jude, I often talk about the time I was in the medicine room there and a 6-year-old boy proudly yelled out, "Mommy, I don't have cancer anymore!" That's all we need and want to hear.

AW: Has the hospital's mission changed over the past five decades?

MT: We've stayed true to our two founding promises: that no child will ever be turned away for his or her family's inability to pay (we pay for everything — treatment, travel, food, lodging — whatever it takes to make a child better) and that the hospital's pioneering research and discoveries will always be freely shared with doctors and scientists around the globe.

AW: What is the hospital's most noteworthy accomplishment?

MT: That we don't stop looking for cures. Ever. When the hospital opened its doors, the survival rate for the most common childhood cancer — acute lymphoblastic leukemia — was only 4 percent. Today, because of St. Jude's work, our survival rate is 94 percent.

AW: Does celebrity involvement help?

MT: Show business has always been a part of St. Jude's heritage. My father raised the first funds to build St. Jude from benefit concerts he gave with pals like Milton Berle, Sid Caesar and Bob Hope. Well-loved celebrities continue to help raise

funds and awareness. Jennifer Aniston is a friend of St. Jude, and on two separate occasions, mothers who had been told their daughters were terminal rushed them to St. Jude after seeing Jennifer on a TV spot for us. Both little girls survived.

AW: How will St. Jude celebrate its milestone anniversary?

MT: We have lots of celebrations and events that will take place around the country. What makes it even more special is that 2012 will also mark what would have been my father's 100th birthday. I don't think it's an accident that these two historic events are in the same year. I'm convinced he's still here, watching over us.



BRIEF Q&A

DID YOU KNOW?

St. Jude treats upward of **260 patients daily**.

The hospital has treated children from **all 50 states and around the world**.

St. Jude's work has helped **increase overall survival rates for childhood cancers from less than 20 to 80 percent**.

A **\$190 million patient-care and research medical tower is currently in the works**.

St. Jude is also in the midst of a three-year, **\$65 million genome project**, the largest investment to date aimed at understanding the genetic origins of childhood cancers.

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