Critical Care

An Oscar-winning producer creates a unique support system for families in need.

AFTER PRODUCER Paula DePree Pesmen won an Academy Award last year for the documentary The Cove, she paid a visit to some young friends in the hospital. "You should have seen those little hands lift the statue and start a mock acceptance speech: 'I'd like to thank my mom and dad..." says Pesmen, who was also an associate producer of the first three Harry Potter films. "It was a wonderfully silly moment."

Creating opportunities for levity is just one of Pesmen's missions as the founder of There With Care (therewithcare.org), a nonprofit based in her home state of Colorado, which helps families of critically ill children in Boulder and Denver with meals, supplies, babysitting—whatever they might need. "I know from my own experience how hard it can be to ask for things," says Pesmen, who nursed her husband through colon cancer in 2000. So she trains her staff of eight (plus a network of some 360 volunteers) to observe, listen closely, and read between the lines. An extra bed, framed artwork, sour candy for a kid who can't taste much else after chemo—any of these might magically appear thanks to TWC.

"Paula stops at nothing," says Cate Buch, whose son Thomas underwent treatment for a brain tumor in 2007, at age 3. When Thomas had a hard time on the daily drive to chemo, TWC arranged for a chauffeur so that he and Mom could sit together in the backseat; volunteers also dropped off dinner for the family every night and found the perfect Shrek for Thomas's birthday party. "We tell people that we can't fix it," Pesmen says, "but we can make it better." —KATE NIEVES

Photograph by Colby Evans