

NEWSROOM

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RESEARCH

MARIA BOOKER '10 RUNS UNIQUE NONPROFIT AIMED AT FUNDING CLINICAL TRIALS.

by [Jane Heeter](#) | March 27, 2020*Above: Maria Booker**Read time: about 4 min*

As part of our Inspiring Leadership initiative, we are asking members of our community to suggest stories about alumni who demonstrate what it means to live a life of significance. Please [send us your suggestions](#). Here is one of those stories.

Every two minutes a child is diagnosed with cancer. One parent hears that her toddler is sick and a short 120 seconds later, another parent receives the same gut punch. Then another shocking blow. Fewer than 4 cents of every federal dollar spent on cancer research is spent on childhood cancer.

Maria Booker ('10) is leading an organization to help reduce the pain of those outcomes by bringing new options to families who face difficult battles ahead of them.

Booker is executive director of Chance for Life, a unique nonprofit that raises millions of dollars to fund pediatric

cancer trials at Children's National Health System and to support work funded by Alex's Lemonade Stand Foundation, an organization which also raises money for the cause.

The work Booker is doing through Alexandria-based Chance for Life gives vital hope to families searching for a cure.

Rich and Nancy Engler are parents who have been punched by cancer. Their son, Luke, underwent treatment for a rare brain tumor that forms in the middle of the brain stem. The Englers connected with Booker and Chance for Life during his battle.

"Leadership is a lot of different things. It's being a friend, being a shoulder to cry on. Sometimes, it's someone who helps light the way for you when you need a path," Rich Engler said.

"We were shoved into a very dark world but we were surrounded by a lot of light. Some of that light certainly came from Maria."

The Alexandria native graduated from Christopher Newport in 2010 with a bachelor's degree in [English](#) with a concentration in literature and a minor in [leadership studies](#). She was a member of the [President's Leadership Program](#), a member of the inaugural class of AmeriCorps volunteers and heavily involved in Greek life and the Student Honor Council.

After graduation, Booker felt driven to pursue a job that didn't traditionally come after studying literature. Her path to giving back to the communities around her began with a year spent in the Peace Corps in Eastern Europe. It was a natural fit after her time volunteering with local nonprofit Alternatives, Inc. through AmeriCorps.

As a Peace Corps volunteer, she helped build the first restroom in a rural school, acclimated to a new language, culture and customs, and became an ambassador in her time with the organization.

"I do feel that Christopher Newport really prepared me for that with all the leadership classes and the programs I participated in," Booker said. "You learn how to evaluate scenarios and take things step by step and project that authority or take leadership in the situations that you're presented with."

She wanted to continue serving others when she returned. She began what would become a six-year stint at Washington, D.C.-based Capital Area Food Bank, first as a grant writer. She would later manage the organization's corporate and fundraising partnerships and events across Northern Virginia.

Chance for Life appealed to Booker as a natural next step. The organization was founded by Brad Nierenberg after his best friend's daughter was diagnosed with an aggressive spinal tumor at just 2 years old.

Nierenberg, like others impacted by pediatric cancer, found out how little research and few trials are funded and decided to do something about it. What started as a small poker gathering 15 years ago to support his friend became one of the largest amateur poker tournaments in the United States, complete with celebrity special guests, live concert performers and a taste experience curated by renowned chefs.

To date, Chance for Life has raised over \$6.5 million to fund several clinical trials and support research done by Children's National doctors.

As the organization grew, Nierenberg knew he needed to place the day-to-day operations in trusted hands. Booker's application stood out – she was young but organized, empathetic and passionate.

Nierenberg described her as the yin to his yang, the operationally minded go-getter able to bolster and implement the plans he envisions as a marketer.

"There isn't anything that I feel I could give her that she's not going to say, 'I can get that done,' or 'I can figure out how to get that done.' I think that, for a leader, you need to have someone who has confidence that they can do anything or figure anything out. That gave me great confidence that I had the right person. She is somebody who had a hunger to take on more responsibility," Nierenberg said.

Booker and Chance for Life planned to up the ante and raise a record \$3 million during the next tournament in February.

Those dollars – 100% go directly to research – could help fund the next cure, said Dr. Elizabeth Kaufman, director of

the Center for Cancer and Blood Disorders at Children's Hospital Foundation.

The cause is close to Kaufman's heart. Her own daughter was diagnosed with childhood leukemia, the most common form of pediatric cancer. The frequency with which the disease is diagnosed has intensified the push for adequate research and treatment options. And while the landscape for childhood leukemia has changed over the years, saving the lives of many children, the same has not been true for brain tumors.

With the money raised by Chance for Life, Children's National is able to host several trials and advance research on T-cells, proteins found in tumors, biopsies and more.

"Some are clinical trials where we are enrolling patients, and some involve more lab science or bench science. They're pre-clinical trials, which are equally important because that's how you identify the next big treatment. So, from my perspective, it's really important to fund a spectrum of trials, and Chance for Life is doing that," Kaufman said.

"With sufficient funding there is great optimism that we can make the same progress in pediatric brain tumors as we have made in pediatric leukemia. We are so grateful to Chance for Life and Maria for their support."

Rich and Nancy Engler connected with Chance for Life when their son, Luke, was battling diffuse intrinsic pontine glioma, or DIPG, an exceedingly aggressive and rare form of cancer found predominantly in children ages 4 to 10 with a less than 1% survival rate.

Hoping to help raise awareness for pediatric brain tumors, the Englers took part in the annual Chance for Life event in 2018 and were honored on stage.

When Luke died later that year, Chance for Life offered to pay for all expenses related to his funeral. He was honored again during the 2019 event as attendees wore "Luke's Squad" bracelets and remembered him during a moment of silence.

Rich Engler described Booker as a person who helped bring a sense of hope, someone to turn to for a "sanity check" when he needed it. He said his family continues to be involved with Chance for Life as the organization works to help others in the fight.

"People like Maria have been a big part of our lives," Engler said. "Chance for Life fills such a critical void in the research space. We have a debt to Maria, Brad and the folks there that I will never be able to repay."
