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Courtesy of Susan Wendel | Susan Wendel with her daughters Emily, left, and Charlotte.

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## Gov. Mifflin alum honored by Working Mother Magazine

By Kimberly Marselas - Reading Eagle correspondent

Friday November 13, 2015 12:01 AM

COLLEGEVILLE, PA — On one of the final days of 2009, Susan Wendel went to the movies a mother of two busy and healthy girls, a scientist with a successful research career and a beautiful home near Collegeville.

Within hours, her entire life would begin to change.

Charlotte Wendel, just 7 at the time, started slurring her words as she sat with her older sister and parents at the theater. In the hospital, Charlotte slipped into a nonresponsive state - and remained that way for nearly three years.

Her daughter's future looked bleak, but Wendel wanted to do all she could to preserve their relationship. That meant being together as often as possible, a goal that would require deep emotional strength, faith and the support of friends, extended family and a loyal church community.

### About Susan Adams Wendel

**1985:** Graduated from Gov. Mifflin High School.

**1991:** Graduated from Rutgers University with a doctorate in pharmaceutical chemistry.

**2005:** Accepted job with Johnson & Johnson. As an associate director,

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To bring Charlotte back home, Wendel would need to plan and pay for a major construction project that transformed her two-story house into a practical and safe space for Charlotte. She'd need to juggle schedules - her work travel, nurses' shifts, older daughter Emily's activities - line up drivers for Charlotte's early chemo treatments and stay on top of supply ordering and at-home therapy exercises.

Through it all, Wendel remained committed to her job as a scientific director for Janssen Research Group, a Johnson & Johnson pharmaceutical company. Wendel leads international teams developing medicines for pain management, oncology and diabetes patients, a job that requires her to travel about a third of the year.

"I love my job," said Wendel, a 1985 Gov. Mifflin High School graduate whose parents still live in Mohnton. "I know the importance of these medications in a way that some people don't. I was also driven by caring for my kids. It was about providing for them. I couldn't lose the house. The house was our hospital."

As if she weren't busy enough, Wendel took on an additional challenge. Recognizing the needs of other families, she worked with church friends to create Happy 2 be Home. The charity provides financial support to families of chronically ill children whose homes need renovating to accommodate multiple disabilities.

This fall, Wendel was named Working Mother of the Year by Working Mother Magazine, official recognition of her ability to meet the needs of her own chronically ill child; a healthy, highly involved teenager; a demanding job; and a growing charity.

### Stunning diagnosis

As 2009 quickly rolled into 2010, doctors at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia diagnosed Charlotte with an ovarian teratoma, a cancer that begins in a female's egg cell. The cancer also triggered a case of the rare and dangerous anti-NMDA receptor encephalitis.

Doctors had hoped that removing the tumor would set Charlotte back on the track to health, but it wasn't to be.

"To our devastation, her body behaved as if the tumor were still there," Wendel wrote in a blog post for Johnson & Johnson. "She couldn't breathe on her own - she was on a ventilator. She was fed by a stomach tube and was incontinent, in a total vegetative state."

After 260 days in the hospitals, when doctors said they'd exhausted all of the treatment options for Charlotte, they handed Wendel pamphlets for nearby pediatric rehab centers.

The thought of sending Charlotte to a sterile institution - where she could live many years in a vegetative state - was unfathomable. She began researching how to bring her daughter home instead. It was a daunting task.

"There is no single source of truth," says Wendel, whose home in Perkiomen Township, Montgomery County, needed about \$30,000 in upgrades and approval from local government officials and nursing agencies before Charlotte could move back in. "Nobody taught me how to do this."

The way she attacked the problem was typical, according to her mom, Carol Adams.

"Sue has always been a determined person, even as a girl, she wanted to be a woman out on her own without depending on anyone," Adams said. "But that attitude has softened a bit."

she is responsible for early drug development.

**December 2009:**  
Promoted to senior director just weeks before her daughter fell ill.

**2014:** Happy 2 be Home, an organization serving families of children with chronic conditions and multiple disabilities, earned official nonprofit status. Wendel and parents of another disabled child are the inspiration. Wendel serves as vice president.

**September 2015:**  
Named Working Mother of the Year by Johnson & Johnson and Working Mother Magazine.

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Wendel's marriage collapsed, leaving Susan and Emily to provide routine comfort and emergency care. (At just 14, Emily eagerly learned how to give CPR through a tracheostomy, how to clean a feeding tube and operate the ventilator as her mom's "second.") But as weeks of caregiving turned into months and years, Susan became more comfortable with her round-the-clock nurses.

She accepted the offers of neighbors who let Emily move in while Susan stayed at the Ronald McDonald House. Church families and friends brought meals or sat and read to Charlotte while Wendel went grocery shopping.

Wendel also relied on the flexibility her job provided. Though she'd long known Johnson & Johnson's reputation as a female-friendly company, she said, colleagues and technology combined to make her situation work - and even allow her to excel.

She learned to ask colleagues for time or adjustments when needed. She'd given up her home office to make room for Charlotte's new first-floor bedroom - and a nurse's desk - but found herself working from all kinds of strange places. Sometimes, she sat in her parked car outside a therapy appointment and participated in teleconferences with colleagues in Belgium and India.

When she traveled, nurses would hold a phone to Charlotte's ear, sometimes inspiring a head turn or a smile. Feeling an emotional tug across the globe, she'd send a text and be reassured that Charlotte and Emily were doing fine.

Wendel continued working with teams on life-changing products like the leukemia drug Dacogen - approved for use in Europe in 2012 - and Yondelis, approved this October for the treatment of soft-tissue cancers - after more than 10 years.

Even if she'd been the type to trade in a career for full-time care-taking, quitting wasn't really an option. She needed the insurance benefits and the income to provide the best at-home care for Charlotte.

## Back to herself

Almost as suddenly as their nightmare had begun, hope emerged.

The nurses had been turning off Charlotte's ventilator, allowing her to breath - albeit roughly - on her own for short periods.

On Father's Day 2012, she took advantage of being unhooked to mutter a single word: "Ma." The memory of hearing her daughter's voice for the first time in three years still brings a broad grin to Wendel's face.

Within hours, according to Adams, they were wheeling Charlotte around outside, asking her to say "Ma" and spreading the good news to neighbors who'd helped them through the tough times.

"When she first began to wake up, she was very much like a toddler, so a lot of what we did (together) was very simple and silly, but it would make me tear up knowing the progress she was making," said Emily, a pre-med major at George Washington University inspired to work with sick children after her sister's illness.

Charlotte made other improvements slowly. She was so eager to sit that she broke three brittle bones and ended up back in the hospital. She relearned how to feed herself, how to talk and took her first steps that December.

Doctors can't fully explain the turnaround. Wendel said it was a miracle that the antibodies that had attacked specific receptors in her brain began to decline, a miracle that she could experience so many firsts again, and a miracle that Charlotte was at home to recover.

"I never thought this was going to elicit her recovery," Wendel said. "I just wanted her to be able to hear my voice every night, to hear her sister, to have all the feelings of home and not just the smells of an institution."

Charlotte is now in seventh grade and continues to make strides. On tap later this month: a trip to swim at Great Wolf Lodge. She loved swimming before her tumor, but it had been off limits until her tracheostomy hole was closed.



## **About Happy 2 be Home**

When doctors were ready to discharge Charlotte Wendel from the hospital with no hope of recovery, Susan Wendel wanted to bring her daughter home instead of to a pediatric rehabilitation center. Members of her church, New Hanover United Methodist in Gilbertsville, and friends raised more than the \$30,000 she needed for home upgrades.

Wendel approached her church and asked that she be allowed to pass the money on to a another family with similar needs. That sparked an idea for Scott Hamrick, owner of a digital communications company that serves many nonprofits, who thought there might be a larger need for such services in the community. “If we had two kids in our own small church, how many were there in the municipality? In the county?” Hamrick asked his pastor. “We can't change the prognosis for those kids, but we can take some of the stress that comes financially.”

Happy 2 be Home — the 2 stands for Charlotte and family friend Nathan, the first two children served — was recognized as a 501 (c)(3) organization in 2014. But the church administered a fund even before then, allowing Happy 2 be Home to award more than \$250,000 toward construction projects in the last four years.

The organization serves families within a half-hour of Gilbertsville, including eastern Berks County. So far, about 20 families have received new bedrooms, retrofitted bathrooms and even a porch swing and ramp. They also work to connect families with other organizations that provide interior decorating, chair lifts or other related services.

To learn more, visit [www.happy2behome.org](http://www.happy2behome.org) or call 610-323-2353.

Donations are accepted online, and Hamrick, now president, said board volunteers are needed. Upcoming fundraising events are also publicized online.

Contact Kimberly Marselas: [life@readingeagle.com](mailto:life@readingeagle.com).



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### Comments (1)

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**James R**

11.13.15 / 9:39 am

Very nice article and my congratulations to Susan on her award. I am not surprised that she has grown into this caring, accomplished young woman. She was always goal oriented and driven to achieve. Gladys Epler would be so very proud.

Joanne Smoker  
Biology Teacher  
Governor Mifflin Senior High  
(Report Abuse)

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