

Honoring Oscar

An Interview with Melissa Rauch, Co-Founder, Oscar's Kids

EDITORS' NOTE *Melissa Rauch is an actress, writer, producer, and most importantly a mother of two incredible children. As a passionate advocate for women's issues, her writings on her experience with pregnancy loss, as well as a PSA she wrote and produced on the subject, were both circulated worldwide.*



Melissa Rauch

INSTITUTION BRIEF *Oscar's Kids (oscarskids.org) was created in honor of the son of Yavanna and Lar Keogh, Oscar, who was diagnosed with terminal brain cancer in January 2018, passing just 19 months later in July 2019. Its mission as a charity is guided by the immense joy with which Oscar lived life, his endless bravery and the magic he injected into every day, even the hardest ones. It is also inspired by the kindness and support bestowed upon the Keogh family by so many charities and individuals during that time. One of the greatest gifts was the beginning of the Keogh's friendship with Melissa Rauch and her husband, Winston, which brought great happiness to Oscar's life and created a deep bond between the two families, leading them to take a journey together as friends and parents to create an international pediatric cancer charity to benefit and support children on both sides of the Atlantic. Oscar's Kids is a fund of the Entertainment Industry Foundation (EIF), a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt organization. EIF is a Charity Navigator 4 Star Charity that meets all 20 BBB Charity Standards and carries the Candid Platinum Seal of Transparency.*

Will you highlight the history of Oscar's Kids and how you define its mission?

We established Oscar's Kids in honor of a magical little boy from Ireland named Oscar Keogh. I was connected with him after his incredible parents reached out to me through Instagram. They shared that, at three-and-a half years old, Oscar was diagnosed with an aggressive and terminal form of pediatric cancer called DIPG. In an effort to bring as much joy to their beautiful

son's life as possible, his parents were contacting people from shows he watched. He enjoyed the Big Bang Theory which I was on at the time and he sweetly called my character his girlfriend. Our friendship grew from there.

Oscar tragically passed away at just five years old as there are no known cures and no successful treatment options for DIPG. It's the same form of cancer that Neil Armstrong's son had and died from back in the 1970s and very little has progressed for DIPG treatments since that time. Given the miraculous power of science to cure nearly anything the medical community seemingly puts its mind to and its money behind, I found the reality facing those children afflicted with DIPG to be simply unacceptable. I wanted to do something in honor of Oscar and to help this community of kids and parents who are literally told by doctors to "go make some memories" because there's nothing else they can currently do. My husband, Winston, and I joined forces with

Oscar's parents, our dear friends, Yavanna and Lar, to form Oscar's Kids. It is now a trans-Atlantic pediatric cancer charity – with a chapter here and one run in Ireland by Oscar's parents – which is committed toward supporting children and families dealing with pediatric cancer and using scientific research to find a cure and treatments for DIPG.

Will you provide an overview of Oscar's Kids' work?

This year Oscar's Kids America is focusing on research for DIPG. We have identified the lab of the brilliant Dr. Michelle Monje at Stanford who is making phenomenal strides in the field and we are working hard to raise as much money as possible to fund her efforts. It is important to us that we spread Oscar's magic to children, so we have efforts underway to partner with the Ronald McDonald House in LA to bring some joy to the families staying there while undergoing treatment. Oscar's Kids Ireland is doing amazing work to bring joy to children diagnosed with cancer, granting "Magic Moments" (special dream treats and gifts the child requests), as well as "Comfort Kits" to the pediatric cancer wards, which are bags of goodies for kids having treatment. Our goal is to continue Oscar's legacy of light and love through all of our work.

How important is it to increase childhood cancer research which to date has been massively underfunded?

Only 4 percent of government funding goes to pediatric cancer research, and even less to cancers like DIPG. This is horrific. We've let down our children on this for way too

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long. We need funds to support new treatments. We need less brutal treatments that are far less taxing on small bodies. We need options. We need hope. No parent should have to hear that there is nothing that can be done for their child.

How has the work of Oscar’s Kids been impacted by the global pandemic?

Oscar’s Kids launched during the pandemic, so it is a charity that has only known pandemic life. Our events have been virtual, so we are excited to see what we can do on the other side of these times.

The process of starting a nonprofit was new to you. How did you approach this process and what has the experience been like for you?

This process was extremely new to me and we went in with zero knowledge of the ins and outs of starting and running a nonprofit. I am so grateful that we were able to surround ourselves with shepherds in this arena. Nicole Sexton, Brian Gott, Jenn Hoerl, Michelle Seuss and the entire team at EIF has been absolutely incredible and we know we are in wonderful hands with them. In addition, we enlisted the expertise of WCPG to help with our fundraising efforts. I believe that all change comes from a passion for something and we’re driven by a passion of wanting to honor Oscar. A passion and a determination to help children have more treatment options available to them. We let that passion fuel us and have been trying our best to learn as we go.

Did you always know that you were attracted to the entertainment industry and that entertainment was where you wanted to spend your career?

Yes, I’ve always loved performing since I was a kid. It was always my happy place. For as long as I could remember, I would put on little shows for my parents and mimic things I saw on TV. I think my parents would have been shocked if I told them I wanted to do anything else.



Melissa Rauch with a photo of Oscar Keogh

You have achieved great success in your career. Do you take moments to reflect and appreciate what you have accomplished or are you always looking at the next challenge?

I am forever grateful for every bit of it. As an actor, I know you are just one audition away from the job of your dreams and there is so much luck of the draw associated with it. I faced a ton of rejection leading up to getting on *Big Bang*, so there wasn’t a day I drove onto the studio lot that I wasn’t counting my lucky stars. Each new endeavor is exciting, but I am so thankful for everything. We aren’t guaranteed our next moments in life, so I think it’s important to be appreciative for what we have in the moment.

What would you like the world to know about Oscar Keogh and the impact that he has made on your life?

Oscar’s parents describe him as sunshine and that is a perfect description. A picture of his smile from *Yav and Lar* would jump off my phone and light up my day. Oscar and the Keogh family are a shining example of the best humanity has to offer. They are the epitome of a family’s endless love. Yavanna Keogh is a brilliant writer, and it was her words on her blog when she first reached out that shot an arrow directly into my heart. In the midst of all they were going through with Oscar’s diagnosis, Yav wrote about the meaning of life in the most extraordinary way that spoke to my soul on such a deep level. It is one of the greatest honors of my life that Oscar and the Keoghs became our extended family and embarked on this partnership with us. I am so grateful Oscar’s magic reached across the ocean to me and I want to do all that I can to spread his magic far and wide. If anyone reading this feels drawn to support our effort, it would mean the world to us if you could visit us at www.oscarskids.org to give what you can. ●

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