

# Granddaughter's plight inspires WSU booster

**TOM ARCHDEACON**  
DAYTON DAILY NEWS

## Local man supports Leukemia and Lymphoma Society



**BEAVER-CREEK** — The night began

with Janel Barnett standing in front of a party-minded crowd of some 600 people and giving a short, emotional talk about her 8-year-old daughter Ally, who a year ago was diagnosed with acute lymphoblastic leukemia (ALL).

Then came a short film showing a day in the life of Ally — “one of the good days,” Mom noted — that included a stop at Dayton Children’s Medical Center for a session of chemotherapy and camaraderie with other kids battling cancer.

But nothing on this night had more impact than the sight of Bob Mills — a bigger-than-life presence in both physical size and entrepreneurial scope — reduced to tears near the back of the stage as he stood in his sweat-dappled coral shirt and tenderly rested his hands on the shoulders of his quiet granddaughter, Ally.

And yet, last Saturday night, May 22, won’t just be remembered for that heart-wrenching scene, but also for the mind-boggling, spirit-lifting events that followed.

Mills, the 60-year-old, Beaver Creek-based construction and real estate magnate, is not just one of nine local people running for the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society (LLS) Man and Woman of the Year in Dayton, he’s set his sights on the LLS National Man of the Year competition that includes local winners from 63 other cities across the country.

Competitors raise money in a variety of ways — every dollar counts as a vote — over a 10-week campaign that ends here Friday night when all the candidates meet for a fund-raising Grand Finale Celebration at the Schuster Center. The local winner will be announced at the end of the evening.

While he also raised money with a Texas Hold’em Tournament, nothing was more gripping than

Saturday’s gala event — called Ally’s Army Battles Cancer — put on at Mills’ Fox Hill home on 50 wondrous acres along Beaver Valley Road.

Mills is involved in philanthropic efforts across the Miami Valley and has a special interest in Wright State athletics, so it was natural the live auction weighed heavily on sports items.

There were 50-yard line tickets to an Ohio State football game, a corporate suite for the Cincinnati Bengals game with New Orleans, VIP Diamond seats for Reds games, tickets to Dayton Flyers, WSU, Kentucky and Ohio State basketball games, Dragons and Kentucky Speedway tickets, a trip to Keeneland, rounds of golf at several courses and much more.

But nothing brought down the house the way Ally did when she kicked off the auction by holding up a bowl she had made at the K12 Gallery in downtown Dayton

“I thought it maybe would bring \$1,000,” Janel said.

Instead the bidding went to \$5,000, then \$10,000 and finally ended at \$14,000.

That set the tone and in an hour, the live auction raised \$115,000. Add in the silent auction and everything else and a whopping \$150,000 was raised for LLS.

“Terry Huber bought Ally’s bowl and she called me this morning,” Janel said. “She told me she wants to give it back to Ally when Ally’s 20 years old and they can look back on this night.”

### ‘A big-hearted guy’

Some years after Mills moved here from Erie, Pa., with his late wife Marcy, he said he visited the University of Kentucky with local business leader Erv Nutter, who was one of the UK’s most generous alumni and had given millions to construct the Nutter Fieldhouse and the E. J. Nutter Training Facility there.

“He told me the best thing I could do for our community was be a philanthropist,” Mills said. “And



**Ally Barnett (center), diagnosed with acute lymphoblastic leukemia, has inspired her grandfather, Bob Mills of Beavercreek, to run for the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society’s Man of the Year in her honor.**

Contributed photo by Erin Cobb

he said a good way to do it is with athletics because when sports are successful they draw attention.”

Mills became heavily involved in Wright State athletics. He’s been on the committees that picked basketball coaches. He built new dressing rooms in the Nutter Center. And with his business partner and fellow philanthropist Sam Morgan, along with Fred Setzer, he built the Mills-Morgan Center that houses the Raiders state-of-the-art practice facilities.

He’s also taken WSU athletes — most notably basketball players Marcus May and DaShaun Wood — under his wing after graduation.

As Mills’ businesses became more successful, his philanthropic involvements grew.

“It’s unreal what he does,” Morgan said. “He’s a big-hearted guy ... and when it comes to kids, he just can’t say no.”

Several years ago Mills started the Mills Family Foundation in part, he said, so that one day his two daughters, Janel and Melissa, and their husbands will carry on the giving work.

“From the start, he stressed two simple

missions,” said Janel’s husband, Jared. “It was to help women and children in need.”

Vicki Giambrone, vice president for marketing and external relations for Children’s, remembers her first dealing with Mills:

“I was at a fund raiser and somebody said, ‘Vicki, what do the kids need over there?’ Well, we had these big box TVs that were 30 years old in the (hospital) rooms, so I said we could use some new flat-screen TVs — like 200 of them.

“And Sam Morgan says, ‘I’ll give whatever Bob gives.’ And Bob said he’d match so and so.”

Suddenly, a five-year fund raiser was done in five minutes and today every room at Children’s has one or two deluxe flat screens.

Since then Mills has become a prime backer of Michael’s House, the Fairborn facility named after Mike Mercurio that treats abused and neglected kids. His foundation just built a church in Beavercreek and he and Morgan knocked \$7 million off their asking price on a 35-acre plot of land that now will be home to the Kettering Health Network hospital in Beavercreek named after Indu and

Raj Soin.

“What I really liked was Bob and his wife Marcy — instead of doing Christmas presents to each other — they’d call and say, ‘What do you need for the kids?’” Giambrone said.

“They got us a vein viewer, four chemo chairs and some high tech giraffe beds — at \$36,000 each — for the incredibly ill neonates.”

And then, out of the blue, that mandate to “help women and children in need” suddenly got very personal for the Mills family.

### Fishing with ‘Pa’

After surviving his own malignant melanoma seven years ago, Mills watched 16-year-old Aaron Whitmer — his next door neighbor with whom he was close — die of brain cancer in July 2008.

At that same time, Marcy was fighting bladder cancer that spread and finally took her life in March 2009.

“Within a week or two after her grandmother died, Ally didn’t want to go to school and she was crying on the soccer field,” Janel said. “But we just thought she was sad that she’d lost her grandmother.

“Then we went on vacation and she just sat in her lawn chair. When we got home, our doctor sent us straight to Children’s for some blood work.”

Jared remembers the day — May 27, 2009 — when the diagnosis came: “My heart just dropped and I nearly fell over.”

In the year since, Ally has gotten weekly chemotherapy treatments at Children’s and has gone to University Hospital in Cincinnati for radiation treatments. She’s had numerous blood transfusions, spent scores of nights in the hospital and, at times, been so sick, Bob said, she was curled in the fetal position and had to be fed intravenously. Along the way, she’s had two of her young friends at the hospital die from cancer.

Yet, other times she was able to join her second-grade class at Valley Elementary or get tutored at home.

Some of her best medicine has come from her grandfather, who she calls Pa. They fish together in the big pond at Fox Hill and tromp through the woods there.

When Ally couldn’t swim at the pool, her grandfather built a concession stand near it so she could “play store for real,” selling sweets to the swimmers.

When LLS was looking for Man of the Year candidates, Bob had to be talked into running.

“Of course with Dad, nothing gets done in a small way,” Janel laughed.

That was evident last October when he held an auction to fund a fellowship for a graduating medical resident to get three more years of education in oncology and hematology. The only requirement was that the recipient returns to the area to practice.

That event raised \$500,000, so that’s why he set his sights on the LLS National Man of the Year. Since the competition began in 1990, he said the most any one person around the country has raised is \$286,000.

On Thursday — on the one-year anniversary of Ally’s diagnosis — Children’s cut the ribbon on the newly renovated Mills Family Lounge on the inpatient hematology and oncology floor. It has a play area for little kids, a computer area for older ones and a kitchenette.

“We spent last Christmas Eve here,” Jared said. “There are some patients who are here for two months straight, so we felt this room should feel a little like a second home.”

After the festivities ended, Ally was coaxed from the art work she was doing with some of the young patients there and asked about her grandpa.

“Well, he’s nice,” she said shyly. “And he’s a good guy...And we go fishing.”

While she admitted he handles the bait and takes the fish off the hook, she showed a flash of Grandpa’s bombast when she quietly added: “But I fish better.”

With that, her freckled face lit up with a big smile.

And right then you knew why Bob Mills is running so hard for Man of the Year.