Hundreds of kids with cancer are smiling today because of this non-profit
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St Jude Childcare, which was set up in 2006 to provide free accommodation and support to children undergoing cancer treatment at Tata Memorial Centre in Mumbai and stop them from dropping out midway, is today present in 517 districts across 27 states.

In 2012, the Tata Memorial Hospital in Mumbai — India’s premier cancer centre — conducted an internal survey and found that its paediatric cancer ward was recording an unusually high dropout rate. The hospital, which sees an average of about 2,100 children every year, bolstered its collaboration with St Jude ChildCare Centre — a non-profit that provides free accommodation and holistic support to children undergoing cancer treatment and their parents — to help address the crisis.

“Parents would pull their children out of treatment midway because they could neither afford the treatment nor an accommodation in an expensive city like Mumbai,” says Dr SD Banavali, director (academics), Tata Memorial. “We began looking at non-profits to help in providing free accommodation and food.” For a hospital, which was seeing an abandonment rate of over 30% a decade ago, has today managed to cap the trend at 2.8%.

The credit goes to St Jude, situated in Cotton Green campus, Sewri, which is home to
165 children, including those suffering from blood cancer. The facility is housed in three old buildings that the Bombay Port Trust gave to the Tata Memorial Hospital in 2016, which it then handed over to St Jude to renovate and run.

How St Judes helps
The centres provide more than just a cost-free, clean and secure place to stay for each of these families: They also provide counselling, education, vocational skill training, ration and nutrition, transport to and from the treating hospitals and more importantly, the care and loving attention needed to help these children recover from an illness that otherwise has high abandonment rates.

Services include:

- A safe place to stay for the entire duration of treatment, which could go up to 24 months
- Cooking facilities with individual stoves for the mothers to cook for the children
- Hygienic environment to ensure their compromised immunity does not lead to infections
- Nutritious ration that is replenished every week
- Daily transport to and from the hospital for treatment
- Teachers conduct education, art, music, yoga and other creative activities
- Recreational facilities and counselling sessions to cope with the stress of treatment
- Skill development and empowerment programmes for parents

Recently, the Tata Memorial Centre, Advanced Centre for Treatment, Research and Education in Cancer (ACTREC) in Kharghar has handed over another building to St Jude, to create further 226 housing units for children. With this, by 2024, the hospital will be able to accommodate 700 children and their families for free.

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A safe space

For Jalgaon-resident Meena Dyneshari, mother of Dyaneshwari Chitte, who is suffering from blood cancer, the accommodation has made a world of a difference. “Though the treatment is free, it is hard to live in Mumbai,” says Meena, whose husband has polio and can barely provide for the family. “At St Jude, we not only get a roof over our head, but also daily rations. They also provide quality education. I am just happy Dyaneshwari is doing well despite the fact that she underwent four chemotherapy cycles.”

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Meena Dyneshari, Jalgaon-resident

The family of four-year-old Kartik Rathod, who was diagnosed with blood cancer this year, also count the accommodation they have received for the last five months in Mumbai as a blessing. Kartik’s father, Kishan, a daily wager from Dhulia, brought his son to Mumbai and stayed in a guest house for 15 days.

Kishan spent Rs 10,000 on food and a room and burnt up his entire savings. “When the doctors told us that Kartik would need almost a year to stay for his treatment my heart sank,” he says. “With no money, I struggled in the city. We even deliberated on returning back home at the risk of stopping his treatment. Today we are grateful his treatment is continuing.”
Treatment for pediatric cancer ranges from six months to sometimes 24 months. “Often the father has to quit his job to settle in Mumbai for the duration of the treatment,” says Madhubala Sharma, programme lead, St Jude, Mumbai unit. “This is one reason why we provide vocational training like mobile phone repairing, electrician work, carpentry, painting, so that at least they can learn a new work skill on the side.”

Quality care

St Jude was set up in 2006 by Nihal Kaviratne, who has spent over 40 years with Unilever, with his wife Shyama Kaviratne. Together they started with an eight-unit centre in Parel to provide shelter to children who are undergoing treatment for cancer at Tata Memorial Hospital.

Over the last 15 years, it has grown into a pan-India organisation, providing a ‘home-away-from-home’ for 467 families across nine cities in India. Today, over 4,500 children and their parents have stayed with St Jude. They are also available in 517 districts across 27 states, with more than half the children hailing from Maharashtra, West Bengal, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan and Bihar.
The journey, according to Usha Banerji, former CEO of St Jude, is incredibly heartening. "The 'Home Away From Home' provides a hygienic, protective and nurturing environment, which gives the children the best chance of beating cancer," says Anil Nair, CEO of St Jude. "We create a community for families who come from all over India and speak different languages, but share the common goal of getting their child treated for cancer."

For instance, Diya Chanda's non-Hodgkin's lymphoma brought her entire family from Kolkata to shift to the city this May. Diya's father, who earns Rs 10,000 a month and arrived in the city with Rs 20,000, had to greatly struggle. But things are looking up now. Today, the 14-year-old has three volunteer teachers helping her prepare for her science, maths and geography. St Jude also provided her a tab so she can attend her regular virtual classes. She has a reason to smile.