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North Caldwell



United in HOPE

HOW TWO FAMILIES JOINED HANDS TO FIGHT USHER 1F & PROTECT THE GIFT OF SIGHT

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DELIVERING NEIGHBORHOOD CONNECTIONS



A THANKSGIVING STORY OF Hope, Gratitude, & Local Action

PHOTOS BY MELISSA SOBEL PHOTOGRAPHY

HOW NORTH CALDWELL'S ROOT AND SBLENDORIO FAMILIES JOINED HANDS TO FIGHT USHER 1F AND PROTECT THE GIFT OF SIGHT.

As families gather around Thanksgiving tables across North Caldwell this month, November naturally turns our hearts toward gratitude, community, and the blessings we often take for granted. For local residents Rachel and Jared Root, gratitude is both a daily anchor and a relentless driving force—one that has inspired a powerful movement of hope and local action right here in our town.

UNDERSTANDING USHER 1F

Usher syndrome is the leading genetic cause of inherited deaf-blindness, with Type 1F representing its most severe form. Children born with Usher 1F are profoundly deaf from birth and experience severe balance challenges. As they grow older, they face progressive vision loss due to retinitis pigmentosa. It is a cruel and heartbreaking diagnosis, yet one that medical researchers believe can be halted—and even cured—with dedicated funding.

THE ROOT FAMILY'S JOURNEY

When Zachary Root was born profoundly deaf, his parents faced a world they knew nothing about. Thanks to modern technology, cochlear implants granted Zachary the gift of sound, allowing his language to develop beautifully as he blossomed into a thriving boy. However, Rachel's motherly instinct noticed subtle balance differences

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compared to his peers. Testing confirmed their deepest fear: Zachary had Usher 1F.

"Fear, panic, and downright anger overtook our family," Rachel recalls. "As if being deaf and overcoming that obstacle was not enough, learning our son will gradually lose his vision was unimaginable. I vowed as his mother that I would stop at nothing to raise awareness and find a cure so no other family has to face this."

EARLY GRASSROOTS IMPACT

Refusing to stand by as Zachary's world grew darker, Jared and Rachel stepped into leadership roles as Trustees for the Usher 1F Collaborative, with Jared chairing the Development Committee. What began with passionate grassroots initiatives—like Honey's Kitchen, the Usher 1F Cereal Challenge, and the national Sight.Sound.Cycle event—quickly gained incredible momentum.

Over the past 11 years, the foundation and its global partners have raised an astounding $17.9 million for medical research. Local support reached new heights this past June at Mountain Ridge Country Club in West Caldwell, where the annual Usher 1F Golf, Tennis, Pickleball, and Mahjong Outing raised an incredible $404,000 in a single day!

GROWING LOCAL COLLABORATION

Now, that momentum is expanding into an exciting local partnership. Fellow North Caldwell residents Frank and Dara Sblendorio, owners of ShopRite West Caldwell and Parsippany, answered the call after connecting with Jared and Rachel at local events.

"We met Jared and Rachel at different social events in town and heard about the struggle Zach faces," Dara Sblendorio shared. "It is frankly part of our DNA to want to help anyone in the community who is working to create awareness and help to further research into such life-altering illnesses. It is why we do what we do—our business is helping people take care of themselves and their families... whether that's with our products or our support in fundraising!"

> "OUR COMMUNITY HAS BEEN NOTHING SHORT OF AMAZING. THE KINDNESS AND GENEROSITY YOU'VE SHOWN ZACHARY AND OUR FAMILY HAVE CARRIED US THROUGH OUR DARKEST MOMENTS, AND WE ARE DEEPLY GRATEFUL."
>
> —RACHEL ROOT

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>
> —DARA SBLENDORIO

Born out of strategic concepts with the foundation's Development Committee, ShopRite West Caldwell and Parsippany will host a special register donation campaign from **Sunday, November 22 through Saturday, December 12**. During checkout, shoppers can easily round up their totals or add a donation to directly fund Usher 1F research.

This Thanksgiving season, as you shop for your holiday meals, every dollar added at the register represents a vital step closer to preserving sight for Zachary and children like him. It is a poignant reminder of what makes North Caldwell so remarkable: when a family faces the unthinkable, neighbors step up to turn compassion into a race to find a cure.



3 WAYS TO TURN COMPASSION INTO ACTION:

1. **Shop & Give at ShopRite of West Caldwell or Parsippany (Nov 22 – Dec 12):**
When checking out at ShopRite of West Caldwell or Parsippany, round up your purchase total or add a direct donation to support the Usher 1F Collaborative. Every dollar at the register directly accelerates medical research.

2. **Scan the QR Code to Donate Instantly:**
Use your smartphone camera to scan the QR code printed in this article. It will take you directly to the Usher 1F Collaborative secure donation page, where 100% of your contribution helps fund life-changing gene therapy and clinical trials.

3. **Share Zachary's Story & Spread Awareness:**
Help us ensure no family faces this diagnosis alone. Share this article with friends, family, and colleagues, or visit www.usher1f.org to learn more about upcoming events, research milestones, and ways to get involved.

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