

JUNE 2024

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NEIGHBORS



MEET THE MEIER FAMILY

A Story of Strength, Courage & Inspiration

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A Story of Strength, Courage & Inspiration

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Professional Photos by
Hope Swanson Black Swan Imagery

Mark and Lynn Meier have lived in Rockford for almost 20 years now. Their unexpected journey has led them on a mission that has inspired many within this community and beyond. Mark grew up in Cadillac and Lynn in the suburbs of Chicago. The two met at Lewis University in Romeoville, IL, but eventually they decided on Rockford as home.

"We wanted out of the big city and settled on the Grand Rapids area. We looked at almost 20 houses in one day before choosing Rockford. We loved the area and read great things about the school district, despite not having kids of our own at the time we relocated."

Mark is currently the VP of sales for a large printing company in Sparta. Lynn is an Associate Media Director with Outdoor Media Group. They have three children and to say they stay busy, would be an understatement. They have a booth at the Rockford Farmers Market a few times per summer, march in the Start of Summer parade and have been involved in many sporting events with Rockford High School, including the Purple Heart game with girls soccer and Glo-Night with the football team.

Their oldest son, Cam, is a junior at Rockford High School. Cam is a captain of the RHS ski team and on the varsity baseball team. He is currently working on his private pilot's license,



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with plans for a career as a commercial pilot. But in the meantime, works for the West Michigan Whitecaps as a batboy and clubhouse attendant.

They also have 15-year-old twins Annika (Anni) and Bode. Bode and Anni will be freshmen next year. He is a competitive ski racer, plays tennis and runs track. Anni played soccer for a while, but unfortunately, due to all the complications from treatment Anni's sports career is over, though she was a very successful ski racer at the youth level. "She was very fast and not intimidated by anything," Mark said.

It's that kind of attitude that she hasn't lost, despite her diagnosis of a medulloblastoma brain tumor in 2021. She has since gone through brain surgery, 31 radiation treatments and six rounds of intense chemotherapy. Annie now suffers from severe deconditioning and has a quadriplegia diagnosis. Despite all she has been through, her family says Anni is the most positive, courageous, brave, and inspiring person they have ever met. "She keeps us going."

She has been that source of inspiration for many in the Rockford community. "From the moment word got out about Annika's brain tumor diagnosis, friends, neighbors, and strangers enveloped our family with prayer, good wishes, meals, and donations. The generosity of the community generated the initial funding of Anni's Army Foundation! Despite being homebound, Annika's 6th grade magnet took a field trip to line our street with a "welcome home" after 13 weeks in the hospital. Friends organized a "parade" along our street to welcome her home that night (it took our family hours to greet everyone that attended). Over 50 people came down to Project Night Lights at the hospital in July 2021 to raise signs and show support for Annika. ERMS ran a hugely successful "Change War" last fall benefitting the foundation. RHS' Beyond the Rock won their first National Student Production Award for their "Knock 'em Out" story on Annika. The list goes on!"

The Meier's can't say enough good things about Rockford Public Schools. While Anni had to miss out on 6th and 7th







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grade, the Meier's say the Rockford school district has bent over backwards to ensure Anni's return to school was an amazing experience. "They continue to work tirelessly as Anni transitions into high school next year. Obviously Anni needs accommodations to be successful and the district has been leading the charge to make sure Anni has everything she needs to do so. We cannot possibly list everyone at RPS who has had a role in Anni's journey, please know we appreciate you all!"

We also can't forget about Tucker, the Meier's almost two-year-old Golden Retriever. "He is a blessing to our family; thinks he is a human and brings joy and laughter to anyone who meets him. Everyone in Rockford seems to know Tucker. Sporting events, school drop off, farmers market, etc. He is technically not Anni's therapy dog or emotional support animal, but he brings her such joy he probably should be." Tucker was Anni's motivation to get through her initial radiation and chemo treatments.

While the Meier's used to spend a lot of their time volunteering in the community, Anni's diagnosis led them on a new mission and they have since started Anni's Army Foundation as a way to give back. They initially started it to raise money and aid in the research of medulloblastoma brain tumors. To date, the foundation has made a \$25,000 donation to Texas Children's Hospital and Baylor College of Medicine's Director of the Pediatric Neuro-Oncology Research Program, Dr. Michael Taylor, and his Preventative Pathway for Medulloblastoma team as well as a \$5,000 donation to Helen DeVos Children's Hospital's Pediatric Oncology Resource Team (PORT).

But they have since expanded their mission with "Anni's Gift". "This part of our foundation we hope makes a positive impact in our community and beyond supporting families with financial assistance that comes with a child with this type of diagnosis." They work to help soften the burden and financial worry for families going through something similar. They have been able to grant over



\$8,000 to eleven pediatric brain cancer families at Helen DeVos Children's and Corewell Health Children's in Royal Oak, MI. Everyone that serves on the board has been touched by cancer in some way and they have no plans on slowing down when it comes to making a difference.

"We don't take things for granted anymore. Well, at least we try our best. We realize life can change in a blink of an eye."

It's a kind of lesson that has changed how they live. When they chose Rockford as home almost 20 years ago, they could have never imagined the journey they would go on, but they are thankful for the support of this community. They have learned and grown a lot over the last few years, but it's Anni's strength that continues to keep them going.

"Her smile, laughter and positive energy is infectious. Watching her interact with people even though her communication is limited is amazing. We have always told Anni she is a draw. People are inspired by her strength, spirit, and her willingness to think outside of her situation, wanting to help others." And they hope that kind of attitude is something many in the community continue to learn from.

To learn more about the work they doing, you can check out: www.annisarmy.org

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