

# From grief to giving: Tulane Medicine employee named top Heart Walk fundraiser

SOM Communications

somcommunications@tulane.edu

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Clockwise from left: Department of Medicine colleagues joined Stephanie Villagran and her daughter for the 2025 Heart Walk. Bottom photo: Stephanie holds her son, Mason.

Stephanie Villagran, a clinical administrator in the Deming Department of Medicine [Section of Nephrology](#) at Tulane University School of Medicine, earned recognition as the top fundraiser among 839 walkers at the [2025 New Orleans Heart Walk](#).

Villagran walked in honor of her son, [Mason](#), who passed away on April 22, 2016.

The Villagran family has walked in his memory each year to raise awareness for pediatric heart disease.

Organized in memory of young Mason Villagran, the [Mason's Angels Heart Walk](#) team placed second in the community, contributing more than \$2,000 to the [American Heart Association](#). These donations help support groundbreaking heart disease research and fund pulse oximetry screenings for newborns, screenings that can detect life-threatening heart conditions early, says Villagran.

Since joining the New Orleans Heart Walk in 2016, the Mason's Angels team has raised an impressive \$23,134 for the American Heart Association. Through consistent participation, top-ranking fundraising, and heartfelt community engagement, Mason's Angels has become a recognized and impactful team in honor of Mason's life and legacy.

For Stephanie, walking each year is a way to keep Mason's spirit alive while supporting families who face similar challenges. Mason's medical journey was long and courageous. Born a twin, he spent nearly six months in the NICU and endured three heart surgeries before 10 months of age, along with more than 20 blood transfusions. After a brief period at home, he returned to Children's Hospital New Orleans for another four months between the CICU and Heart Center. After finally returning home, Mason continued OT, PT, speech therapy, and daily specialized care.

Mason was just two and a half years old when he died. More than his diagnoses, including ASD/VSD, AV valve deficiency, lung disease, and Down syndrome, Mason is remembered for his joyful demeanor and bright personality. His loss continues to deeply impact Stephanie, his father Chris, and his twin sister Malaya.

Having lived through the realities of pediatric heart disease, the Villagran family understands the importance of community support. Stephanie notes that many people associate heart disease primarily with adults, even though congenital heart defects affect approximately one in three newborns.

"We're trying to get Jefferson Parish and Tulane more involved," Villagran said. "It's important that our community embraces these families. If we create more awareness, families won't be afraid to talk about pediatric heart disease. People avoid the conversation because it involves children, but these conversations matter."

In addition to their fundraising for the American Heart Association, the Villagran family established a fund dedicated to supporting families in the Cardiac Intensive Care Unit (CICU) at [Manning Family Children's](#). These donations help provide meals, food support, Christmas gifts, and other necessities, resources the family knows firsthand are invaluable during long hospital stays.

To date, more than \$26,000 in donations, gifts, and sponsored items [have been contributed in Mason's honor](#). His legacy continues to touch lives every year, turning his family's profound loss into lasting support for others.





Despite everything he endured in his short life, Stephanie Villagran says Mason had a joyful demeanor and bright personality.