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Boston businesspeople, childhood pals, co-chair St. Jude's board of governors

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As kids growing up in West Roxbury, Judy Habib and Paul Ayoub would go door-to-door in their neighborhood knocking on doors and asking for donations to St. Jude Children's Research Hospital.

Ayoub and Habib had personal connections to the cause. Both of their fathers served on a board connected to the Memphis hospital, which treats kids with cancer and other serious conditions. Even as children they felt the importance of contributing in a small way to the cause.

Now as successful businesspeople in the Boston area, Ayoub and Habib are taking on a more central role in St. Jude's efforts: Ayoub as chair and Habib as vice chair of the hospital's national board of governors.



ST. JUDE CHILDREN'S RESEARCH
HOSPITAL

Two Boston businesspeople, Judy Habib, left, a co-founder of KHJ Brand Activation, and Paul Ayoub, right, the chair of the law firm Nutter, are new vice chair and chair of St. Jude Children's Research Hospital. Marlo Thomas, the daughter of late St. Jude founder Danny Thomas, poses with them.

It's a long way from counting donations on their kitchen tables as kids, but fitting for all their years of work for the organization.

"It's pretty remarkable," said Habib, whose parents named her after St. Jude. "Our parents were — are — just euphoric," said Ayoub of their late mothers and fathers.

"Smiling from above," Habib added.

Habib is a co-founder of the Boston ad firm KHJ Brand Activation and president of the board of the Massachusetts Women's Forum. Ayoub is the chair of the Boston law firm Nutter and a partner in its real estate department. Habib serves on the board of directors for the Greater Boston Chamber of Commerce, while Ayoub is on the executive committee and a former chairman.

Ayoub and Habib's ethnic background plays a role in their involvement. The mission of the charity started by actor Danny Thomas, the American Lebanese Syrian Associated Charities, was to raise funds and awareness for St. Jude. Both Habib and Ayoub have Syrian and Lebanese parents: Habib's mother was Syrian and father was Lebanese, while Ayoub's father was Syrian and his mother was Lebanese.

The two knew Thomas through their common heritage, and their fathers — Joseph Ayoub Sr. and Halim Habib — served on the founding ALSAC board. The younger Ayoub joined in 1992 and the younger Habib two years later.

Thomas, as the story goes, prayed to St. Jude — said to aid helpless causes — with a plea: help me become a successful actor and I'll build you a shrine. When Thomas did find success, he went even further, building a hospital that would care for children with the most serious diseases. It was in Memphis, where it would be the first fully racially integrated hospital in the South.

"It was a value instilled in us to give back, to be grateful, and to help those who are less fortunate," Habib said.

Ayoub said St. Jude's household name recognition makes it easier to attract donations, but comes with the responsibility to use its contributions as wisely as possible. The hospital doesn't charge for treatment, travel, housing or food, and shares all the important research it conducts, including mapping a cancer genome, for free.

Ayoub and Habib were made co-chairs of St. Jude in June, but the interview last week coincided with a SpaceX rocket that was about to take off with two notable crew members with connections to the hospital. Hayley Arceneaux, a physician assistant at St. Jude hospital and a former pediatric cancer patient there, and Jared Isaacman, a billionaire businessman who has committed to raising \$100 million for the center.

Ayoub and Habib have taken the helm as St. Jude embarks on a six-year, \$11.5 billion fundraising campaign to benefit both medical treatment and research.

Despite its Memphis location, St. Jude has strong connections to Boston. Research collaborations include experts from Dana-Farber Cancer Institute, Harvard Medical School, Boston Children's Hospital, Mass General Brigham and MIT. Four of its 15-member scientific advisory board members are from Massachusetts institutions, including Harvard, Dana-Farber, Boston Children's and the Broad Institute.

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