



Kenny Kramm reads a favorite book with Hadley, who was the inspiration for FLAVORx. Hadley's older sister, Sarah, and her mother, Shelley (pictured at the table), also were profoundly affected by the younger girl's disorder.



Inspired by his daughter, a local pharmacist created a product to help children (and now pets) take their prescriptions

By Sarah Lyon

How Kenny Kramm helped the medicine go down

MICHAEL VENTURA

Kenny Kramm still remembers struggling to get his infant daughter, Hadley, to take her four daily doses of anti-seizure medication. Little wonder, given its bitter taste. Inevitably, Hadley would throw it up, and about once a week she'd suffer a seizure and end up in the hospital as a result.

Finally his wife, Shelley, said: "Kenny, you work in a pharmacy. Can't you do something about this?"

Kramm not only worked in a pharmacy, he'd grown up in one. Center Pharmacy, the family business, was in the Spring Valley neighborhood of Washington, D.C., and from age 12, he had helped out, shelving and putting price stickers on items. A graduate of Potomac's Winston Churchill High School, he had studied business and marketing at the University of Maryland, then briefly worked as an art director. But the family business had drawn him back. "I liked working with people," he says.

That summer after Hadley's birth, he worked alongside his father, Harold, trying to come up with a way to help his daughter. The two men would close the pharmacy at 8 p.m., and then spend two hours a night experimenting with concentrated flavoring, hoping to make the medicine more palatable. After several weeks, Kramm came up with a banana flavor that Hadley was able to stomach.

The year was 1992, and Kramm's creation led to the founding of FLAVORx,

the first company of its kind. By the time he sold the business 15 years later, FLAVORx was being distributed to 48,000 pharmacies in the United States and Canada, as well as pharmacies in Puerto Rico, Australia and New Zealand. Today, it's the No. 1 behind-the-counter flavoring system.

Kramm knows he owes it all to Hadley. "Of course, if I had my choice...I would want Hadley to be normal," the 50-year-old Potomac resident says. "Although everything would be different."

Hadley was born at a local hospital that Kramm prefers not to name on Feb. 6, 1992, about a month and a half early and weighing only 3 pounds.

The couple's older daughter, Sarah, also had been born prematurely. Sarah was blue, with an Apgar score of 0, but she suffered no ill effects afterward. Similarly, Hadley "was fine, but small," Kramm says.

Hadley was placed in a hospital incubator for a month. Ten days in, she was moved from one crib to another, and at some point afterward, she suffered a severe bilateral brain hemorrhage. The hospital diagnosed Hadley with a seizure disorder before releasing her, and the Kramms had no clue of any lasting damage. By the time she was a year old, though, Hadley still hadn't rolled over, much less walked. Kramm thought she was just late developing, but his wife feared it was something more serious. When they

took her to be evaluated by their pediatrician, and then by a neurologist, they learned she had cerebral palsy.

Nearly 800,000 Americans have cerebral palsy, according to the United Cerebral Palsy Foundation. The neurological disorder affects body movement and muscle coordination to varying degrees—often resulting in spasticity, difficulty walking, stiff or floppy muscle tone and more. As in Hadley's case, seizures are common—as many as half the children with cerebral palsy experience them. Other conditions associated with the disorder can include mental retardation, delayed growth and difficulty hearing, speaking and seeing.

Most people with cerebral palsy are born with it, according to the National Institutes of Health (NIH) in Bethesda, although a brain injury like Hadley's can also cause it. Sixty-five to 90 percent of children with cerebral palsy live to adulthood, NIH says, and many of them experience premature aging, pain and depression.

Kramm suspected, after having reviewed Hadley's hospital records, that his daughter's initial brain hemorrhage and cerebral palsy might have been the result of a hospital error: When she was moved from one crib to another, he believed she was mistakenly given a medication intended for the previous occupant. In the end, he and his wife decided they were too exhausted to investigate further.

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—Kenny Kramm,
creator of FLAVORx

“There was about a year when Shelley and I both felt very sorry for ourselves,” Kramm says. “We felt, why us?” But eventually the couple came to reason that “life dealt us these cards, this is what it is. Hadley’s not going to be different, so we better change ourselves.”

Even before Hadley’s diagnosis, Kramm had worried about his daughter’s future. After the diagnosis, those worries intensified. “You lay in bed and you wonder what’s going to happen after Shelley and I are gone,” he says. “Is she going to end up in some terrible institution or something like that?”

Had the Kramms chosen to pursue legal action over what they believed to be a medication mix-up, Hadley’s fi-

ancial future might have been set. But they decided not to do so. “Shelley and I aren’t vindictive people,” Kramm says. “We just thought we could do something that would help everybody.”

He began to channel his energy into FLAVORx, a way “to do something good and escape from thinking about the problem with Hadley.”

From 1992 to 1995, Kramm worked from 6 a.m. until 11 p.m. developing and expanding FLAVORx. Originally, Center Pharmacy mainly served geriatric customers—it had been located in a nursing home on O Street in the 1960s before moving to Spring Valley in the ’70s. Shortly before Hadley was born, the pharmacy moved across the street to its current location, which had pediatricians’

offices below and a Children’s Hospital Outpatient Center above. After Kramm began selling FLAVORx, the pharmacy’s customers were 90 percent pediatric.

Kramm incorporated the company in 1995. He knew that building a successful FLAVORx was critical to Hadley’s financial security. That same year, he and his father attended a National Community Pharmacists Association conference in Las Vegas. Kramm had the most popular booth at the show. “People were saying this was the best idea since a pharmacy had developed Coca-Cola,” he says.

FLAVORx took off fast after that. Kramm won about a dozen contracts with independent pharmacies. He initially didn’t want to sell the product to chain pharmacies, but he realized that



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medicine go down

some people would have to travel long distances for the flavorings. “I felt at that point everyone should be able to have [FLAVORx],” he says, “not just those people who are close to an independent [pharmacy].”

In that spirit, he sent thousands of bottles of FLAVORx to troops in Iraq in 2004, to disguise the taste of the water there. “I feel like I’ve done something good that helped a lot of people,” he says. Kramm went to the Dominican Republic and Thailand with the William J. Clinton Foundation, as well, to help with children taking HIV medication.

Also in 2004, Kramm won Ernst & Young’s Entrepreneur of the Year award. Three years later, he sold FLAVORx to an investor group.

During Kramm’s tenure, FLAVORx came in 42 varieties—with bubblegum the favorite among kids, he says. Today the company offers just 10, though they can be combined for a total of 15 different flavors, says Chad Baker, the company’s vice president of marketing. Kramm also received requests to make flavored medicines for animals during his time at FLAVORx. He created 35 different flavors for pets, 18 of which are still available today.

Pharmacies add 20 to 40 drops of the flavoring, depending on the size of a prescription, Kramm says. The product uses both natural and artificial flavors, and is nonallergenic, sugar-free, sodium-free and dye-free. Sweetener, which comes from stevia plants, is added separately.

Since selling the company, Kramm has started Center Pet Pharmacy at the site of his father’s old pharmacy. It uses versions of FLAVORx that Kramm previously designed—such as beef, bacon, tuna and salmon—to make liquid medicines taste better for animals. The pharmacy also produces chewable medications, transdermal medications and more. Though Kramm grew up with pets, he doesn’t have a cat or dog now because Shelley’s allergic to them. But they do own fish, which swim in a pond outside Hadley’s room.

One of about a dozen Veterinary-Verified Internet Pharmacy Practice Sites certified in the United States—an accreditation to dispense medications online—Center Pet “is starting to grow quickly, like FLAVORx,” Kramm says. He estimates that three-quarters of Center Pet sales come from online customers.

“There was never a thought in my head that I was going to be an entrepreneur,” he says, “and now I’ve started [to be] sort of a serial entrepreneur.”

Like Kramm, Shelley and Sarah have been profoundly influenced by Hadley’s experience.

With the help of then-Maryland House of Delegates member Mark Shriver, radio and television host Billy Bush and others, Shelley raised more than \$1 million to build Hadley’s Park, a handicap-accessible playground on Falls Road in Potomac that was completed in 1999. Disabled and nondisabled children can use the playground, which features swings with solid frames designed for disabled children who are unable to hold their bodies upright; signs written in braille; and a castle, pirate ship and frontier village that are wheelchair accessible to help children explore and use their imagination. Shelley says more than 250 such parks have been built nationwide by other groups.

Now 50, Shelley describes her work and her husband’s as “taking a lot of negative energy and putting it into something positive.” She is writing a book about raising a special-needs child and about the influence Hadley has had on others through Hadley’s Park and FLAVORx. She describes the book as a more in-depth version of some of the topics touched on in her blog, *I’m Still Standing*.

Sarah, now 23, was Miss Continental Teen America in 2005 and “went around the country speaking about disability awareness,” Kramm says. She lives in Baltimore and works as a special events administrator at the American Heart Association.

A desire “to end discrimination against the disabled” prompted Sarah to become involved with pageants. “With a title, I believed that more people would listen to me,” she says. When she was 17, she designed wristbands with the words “I am ABLE,” meaning everyone is able to stop discrimination against the disabled, she says. The bracelets benefit Shane’s Inspiration, a nonprofit organization similar to Hadley’s Park that commemorates a Los Angeles boy who died of spinal muscular atrophy shortly after birth.

Though Sarah grew up watching her sister receive most of the attention, she “understood how difficult Hadley’s life was for her,” Kramm says. “She would really stick up for her.”

The sisters have remained close. “[Hadley’s] my best friend and I tell her everything,” Sarah says. Hadley says little during their phone calls, but “she knows what I’m saying, she comprehends everything,” Sarah says.

Now 19, Hadley attends Thomas S. Wootton High School in Rockville, where she will remain until she turns 21. She enjoys being integrated into elective classes for a few periods each day, and does physical, occupational and speech therapy while at school. During her time at Wootton, Hadley has had multiple Best Buddies—nondisabled students who volunteer in the program founded by Anthony Kennedy Shriver. “Kids are just drawn to her, they’ve been so nice to her,” Kramm says.

Wootton special education teacher Jeannie Kim describes Hadley as cheerful and outgoing, and says she is well-liked by her peers. “She comes into my classroom every morning saying, ‘Good morning!’ with a big smile,” Kim says. “She makes everyone around her happy. She has a lot of love to give to other people, and this quality about Hadley makes her very popular at school.”

Kim has seen the girl become more independent over the years. She’ll take the initiative to eat, pack and unpack her

backpack, zip her coat and answer questions on her own. She also has started to speak up more. “This year, she learned to say her first sentence, ‘My name is Hadley,’” Kim says. “Hadley works very hard, and is very proud of her accomplishments.”

In addition to limited speech, Hadley has limited motor skills. She uses a wheelchair and requires assistance when walking, coloring and doing other things that involve her hands and feet. “There’s no way to explain to Hadley abstract thoughts or even directions sometimes,” Kramm says. But “Hadley understands everything, she can take it all in. ...If somebody’s upset in the house, she gets upset.”

Hadley’s medical expenses total more than \$100,000 a year. A full-time caretaker lives with the family, and a therapist periodically stays in the home to work with Hadley. The Kramms added a handicap-accessible area—which Shelley designed—onto their house in Potomac.

Hadley takes tutti-frutti and other flavored medication three times a day. “She’s never been back in the hospital due to lack of compliance ever since” those early days of her infancy, Kramm says.

Looking back on his experience with Hadley and with FLAVORx and Center Pet, “I feel like I have left my footprint in the sandbox of life, and I feel like I have made a difference to humans and now to animals,” Kramm says. “When you’re helping animals, you’re also helping the humans that are taking care of them.”

He still worries about Hadley’s future, but he tries not to dwell on it. “I think with everybody’s life there come some challenges in one way,” he says. But “everything happens for a reason.” ■

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