

ZO'S BRAVEHEARTS FOUNDATION'S LETTER TO POPE LEO XIV LEADS TO VATICAN VISIT FOR THREE FAMILIES FACING CHILDHOOD CANCER

An unlikely connection to the pope's driver helped turn one man's hopeful outreach into an extraordinary journey for three girls and their families

LAS VEGAS, NV, UNITED STATES, October 7, 2026 /EINPresswire.com/ -- [Zo's Bravehearts Foundation](#) has returned from the Vatican, where three Las Vegas girls facing childhood cancer and their mothers attended a general audience with Pope Leo XIV following an invitation made possible by a personal letter and an unexpected series of connections.



Alexandria Riley and her daughter, Autumn W., meet Pope Leo XIV during a Vatican visit organized by Las Vegas nonprofit Zo's Bravehearts Foundation.

Seated in the second row of a section reserved for special blessings in St. Peter's Square, the girls and their mothers were personally greeted by the pope following the audience. Zo's Bravehearts Foundation was formally announced among the groups in attendance. The girls also received blessed Miraculous Medals depicting Mary.

The journey began when Rino Armeni, founder and president of Zo's Bravehearts Foundation, arrived in Italy with four and a half days, no direct Vatican connection and a determination to deliver a letter to the pope.

A friend in Turin unexpectedly connected Armeni with the pope's driver and assistant, opening a path to the Vatican. Armeni wrote a letter sharing the story behind the foundation and the families it serves. His friend then boarded a train to Rome to deliver the letter to the driver, who helped pass it along to Vatican officials. Armeni later received an email inviting three children supported by the foundation, known as Bravehearts, and their mothers to attend the general audience.

"I went to Italy without knowing anyone at the Vatican or even where to begin," Armeni said. "But I knew the stories of our children and families deserved to be heard, so I asked for help and followed every connection I could. When the invitation arrived, the most meaningful part was knowing we could bring the families with us."

For Mackenzie, 13, meeting the pope became one of the defining moments of the journey. He held both of her hands and told her, "You are so strong ... and you, my dear, are going to be okay."

The girls also carried pieces of Las Vegas with them to the Vatican. The Vegas Golden Knights and Las Vegas Raiders provided signed jerseys for the girls to present to the pope. Autumn and her mother, Alexandria, presented the Golden Knights jersey, while Theodora and her mother, Tristan, presented the Raiders jersey.

Monica Olivares, the foundation's director of family services, carried a sign reading "Las Vegas Loves You, Pope Leo XIV," inspired by the iconic Welcome to Fabulous Las Vegas sign. It also featured a photo of Jocelyn, a Braveheart who was unable to travel because of her health, allowing her to be represented during the visit.

Following the general audience, the group received a private guided tour of the Vatican Grottoes beneath St. Peter's Basilica, led by the pope's driver — the same person who had helped Armeni's letter reach Vatican officials. The Vatican newspaper, L'Osservatore Romano, also listed "Zo's Bravehearts Foundation, Las Vegas, Nevada" among the groups in attendance.

Olivares described the visit as a "once-in-a-lifetime experience." For Michelle Shores, Mackenzie's mother, that description did not quite capture its significance. "It was more like a once-in-10-lifetimes experience," Shores said.

Zo's Bravehearts Foundation supports families facing childhood cancer through tailored services that ease everyday burdens and experiences that create opportunities for connection, joy and time together.

For more information, please visit www.zbfnv.org

[About Zo's Bravehearts Foundation](#)

Zo's Bravehearts Foundation is a Las Vegas-based 501(c)(3) nonprofit dedicated to supporting families of children battling cancer. With a unique, family-centered approach, the foundation focuses on easing the logistical and emotional burdens placed on parents and siblings so they can focus on what matters most—their child's healing. Through hands-on services such as safe home restoration, nourishing meals, reliable transportation support, comfort essentials, and personalized family care, Zo's Bravehearts restores stability, provides meaningful relief, and gives families back precious time together. Rooted in compassion and powered by community, the organization partners with local businesses and supporters to deliver comprehensive care and

bring hope to families navigating childhood cancer. For more information, please visit www.zbfnv.org

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