



NYC Youth Chair: Mariana Gilbert Team Mariana

Over eight years ago, we were blessed by the birth of our strong and beautiful daughter, Mariana. Mari was born too early (by 15 weeks), super tiny (at a whopping 1 pound 3 ounces, nine inches long) and very sick (too many ailments to name and many nights when it was unclear whether she'd make it). During her turbulent five-month stay at the hospital, Mari battled many life-threatening illnesses and underwent open-heart surgery. Progress came slowly and setbacks were trying. We got accustomed to worry; we didn't know if Mari was ever going to see, talk or walk. But Mari's strength inspired us. Today, Mari, who is in first grade, reads Dr. Seuss to her three-year-old brother, serenades us with "Despacito", "Vivir La Vida" and "Shake It Off", and uses cartwheels to get around. At birth Mari fit in our hands, now she has perfected her handstand, swims and dives. Mari is less tiny, extremely curious and resilient - not to mention loving, happy and fun(ny). Mari leads our family in March for Babies in memory of all her NICU mates who never made it home, to help future families and to remind us of how fortunate we are. In 2019, Mari raised over \$25,000 by herself for Team Mariana, and this year she is New York City's first-ever Youth Chair!

-Damaris Hernandez and Joseph Gilbert