

miracles &
memories

Summer 2024



Give Kids
The World
Village



Deja's Wish Grows

Crops of Love

Eager to make a grand entrance, Deja stormed into the world at just 34 weeks. An old soul with a precocious vocabulary, the happy, healthy little girl was joined 15 months later by sister Olivia, and the two became inseparable...dancing, laughing princesses whose days were filled with music and joy. A few years later, as mom Angela awaited the arrival of baby girl number three, she was diagnosed with a pregnancy-induced heart condition – requiring seven months of bed rest.

With Angela sidelined from the blissful chaos, Papa and Nana arrived to help. Deja was so excited to see them, she jumped on the couch, fell backwards and hit her head. While seemingly fine at the time, Deja began experiencing severe headaches atypical of a three-year-old. By the time she was seen by a neurologist, she was dragging one foot when she walked and showed signs of losing her peripheral vision. An MRI confirmed what doctors suspected: DIPG (diffuse intrinsic pontine glioma), an aggressive tumor spider-webbed around the brain stem.

In the doctor's conference the next day, sitting across from a gauntlet of neurologists, neurosurgeons, neuro-oncologists, radio-oncologists and nurses, Angela tried to absorb the terrible words that changed life as they knew it: "we are still waiting for the first to survive this."

"I can't remember much of what was said after that, but I do remember watching my soul step out of my body, screaming," says Angela. "I just could not comprehend what was happening."

Deja was given four to six months to live with no medical treatment, or eight to 12 months with radiation. Deja immediately began treatment, receiving a lifetime amount of radiation over six weeks to slow the tumor down.

"For 10 miraculous months, we LIVED!" says Angela. "By then a single parent, I gave her everything I could on every good day. From the carousel at the mall, to an IMAX movie and a tour of the fire

department, we squeezed something into every day. I was still pregnant for it all, and supposed to be on bed rest; but Deja was my first priority.”

During baby Jovonne’s delivery, Deja went into caregiver mode. She asked the doctors to move out of the way so she could see, cut the cord, and served as nursemaid for mom and baby during their hospital stay. The birth put Deja’s wish to meet Cinderella into high gear; and just one month later, with Nana and Papa along to help, the family embarked on a magical adventure at the Village.

“I knew we were staying at Give Kids The World Village, but never did I imagine what that meant,” says Angela. “What we experienced was a dreamlike, fairytale world where everyone went out of their way to make sure we felt special. That week, my fragile, frail, sick daughter was swimming, running through the splash pad laughing, eating ice cream for breakfast, getting her nails done like a princess in the Rockin’ Spa, and riding the carousel over and over until she’d ridden every animal. It was the first time I saw her smile in a very long time!”

After arriving back home, Angela was thrilled to hear that a woman named Jody who worked with her mother had offered to create a special scrapbook for her family about their wish trip; and of course, she said yes. In short order, Jody McNellis, her sister, Lisa, and mother, Bonnie, gathered a group of caring, passionate crafters in their hometown near Phoenix and began creating a one-of-a-kind keepsake complete with photos, ticket stubs and other mementos. One sunny day in June, the group arrived at Angela’s home to deliver the scrapbook. Deja wasn’t feeling well, so Papa carried her down the stairs to see it. With the turn of the first page, she lit up, pointing at every photo and smiling as they moved through the book. Angela and her family were overwhelmed with gratitude.



Sadly, Deja passed away on July 25, 2007; but her legacy lives on. Inspired by how much joy the scrapbook brought Deja, Jody quit her job, cashed in her 401K, and started the nonprofit Crops of Luv. Operating on a shoestring budget, the all-volunteer group gathers at homes and crafting retreats to create custom scrapbooks for wish families who have visited the Village – weaving each family’s memories into priceless treasures, all at no cost.

With a motto of “a life preserved is a life remembered,” Crops of Luv offers every Give Kids The World wish family the opportunity to receive a scrapbook no matter how long ago their wish trip was. Since 2008, the



nonprofit has created more than 4,000 beautifully designed scrapbooks for families from around the world.

“Crops of Luv was created to transform happy memories into something that can be seen, touched and cherished forever. Scrapbooks promote healing, inspire hope, and give wish families a respite from the stress and worry of what life has tossed at them,” says Jody. “I am grateful to the devoted crafters, vendors and donors who make our efforts possible.”

In March, Angela joined dozens of Alumni wish families and 25 Crops of Luv volunteers at a week-long scrapbooking celebration at the Village, giving families an opportunity to learn about scrapbooking as they helped to create their own memory books alongside master crafters. Festivities culminated with a fairytale tea party in The Hoppening Place on Founder’s Day, March 7, where families had the opportunity to share their stories. The experience proved very emotional for Crops of Luv volunteers, the majority of whom had never been to the Village; and brought Angela back together with the extraordinary women whose selfless efforts have impacted countless families like hers.

“These books allow us to remember the best times with our kids. They are the memories that keep our children alive in our hearts and connected to their siblings who are still here. They are therapeutic: helping us heal while celebrating life, and helping to preserve a legacy worth remembering,” says Angela. “I am so grateful to Crops of Luv and its remarkable volunteers. All of these kids deserve to tell their stories, and Crops of Luv creates the doorway for them to do that, one kid and one wish at a time.”

“We are grateful beyond words for the passionate volunteers from Crops of Luv for bringing cherished memories to life for wish families,” said Give Kids The World President & CEO Pamela Landwirth. “Their selfless efforts bring light and hope into the hearts of countless families who need it most.” **To learn more about Crops of Luv, visit www.cropsofluv.org.**



A Very Bright Light

Five-year-old Harvey Bacon is proof positive of the healing power of hope. Diagnosed in utero with tetralogy of Fallot with pulmonary atresia/MAPCA's – a severe congenital heart defect with five heart abnormalities, Harvey was born at Texas Children's Hospital in Houston and immediately moved from his parents' arms to the cardiovascular intensive care unit (CVICU.)

"Tetralogy of Fallot...those big, scary words sent our family down a road that we were not familiar with and towards a front row seat watching one of the toughest little kids overcome so many odds," says Harvey's dad, Bryson, who moved with his family three hours south of their home in Killeen for Harvey's delivery and care. "We were so happy to meet our little heart warrior, but we knew that this was the start of his fight for life."

Following the first of many heart surgeries and several months of recovery, the Bacons were able to move back home, with regular trips to Houston for cath's and surgeries. In the spring of 2023, Harvey was notified of his wish trip to Give Kids The World Village – but soon learned he would need another open heart surgery – his fifth – prior to the trip.

"Harvey knows that he has a special heart that needs help from doctors, but he was very concerned that this upcoming surgery would get in the way of his visit. It was such a blessing to be able to use his upcoming wish trip to get through the hard times of the last surgery. We used photos from Give Kids The World Village to plan fun activities we looked forward to doing. Knowing that he had this trip to look forward to helped him get through the surgery, postoperative therapies and hospital stays."

Arriving through the gates of the Village put Harvey's health battles squarely in the rear-view mirror. During a week of fun and adventure, Harvey and his family did all the things they talked about doing during Harvey's recovery: Harvey and his brother, Curtis, had their hair colored and got tattoos in the Rockin' Spa; they played miniature golf at Marc's DinoPutt; had ice cream for breakfast; and got tucked in with a bedtime story from a pirate and a fairy.

"Our stay at the Village was such a blessing to our family. It was a very bright light at the end of many tough tunnels. While the rides and activities were amazing, it was the care and love from the staff and volunteers that made it so special. We felt so welcome; it was so much more than we expected!"

Harvey's magical wish culminated with his Star Experience in the Castle of Miracles.

"My star holds all my fun memories from our trip. It will always be at GKTW with Stellar. Other kids like me have stars in the galaxy there. I like being a part of something special like that," says Harvey.



5 Million Reasons To Celebrate

Nearly 500 volunteers and wish families gathered at the Village on April 20 to commemorate a remarkable milestone. Volunteers have served 5 million hours and filled 1.6 million volunteer shifts at the Village, making it possible for Give Kids The World Village to create happiness and hope for wish families from around the world during life-changing week-long wish vacations in our fully accessible storybook resort.

"Volunteers are the very heart of the Village," says Give Kids The World President & CEO Pamela Landwirth. "Our goal is to spread joy, inspire hope, and create magical memories for our precious guests. We simply could not fulfill our mission without our amazing volunteers. We are grateful beyond words that they choose to share



their time, talents and hearts with us. Our volunteers change the lives of our wish families, and in the process, their own lives are enriched."

A few times each week, Dr. Stewart Dobbins volunteers at the Village after spending a full day at work. "As a pediatrician, I know first-hand the struggles and hardship these children endure. The bravery and heart these little ones have is just incredible. Volunteering at the Village can sometimes be more rewarding than my real job," says Dobbins. "The progress made by the kids staying here with their families is often off the charts. I've seen terribly sick children come here to have their wishes granted whose health turns completely around. It's amazing, it really is. I get back far more than I give."

To learn more about rewarding volunteer opportunities for individuals, groups and corporate teams, please visit www.gktw.org/volunteer/.



Lionheart: Ariel's Story

"During our stay at Give Kids The World Village, we saw first-hand the kindness and generosity of so many volunteers and staff. Our stay felt like a home away from home and took the daily pressures of life and medical appointments away. Ariel and our whole family experienced joy, love, kindness, and the true meaning of the human spirit while at the Village," says Capri Rietel, whose daughter, Ariel, was diagnosed in utero with an interrupted aortic arch and ventricular septal defect due to a rare genetic disorder. "The weeks leading up to her delivery were filled with scans, appointments and uncertainty; but no amount of concern could overshadow the pure joy we had the day she was born. The name Ariel means 'Lion of God,' and she came into this world a fighter." At five days old, Ariel underwent her first heart surgery; and while recovering from her second heart surgery – bringing with it a host of critical complications, Ariel learned that her wish had been granted. Once she was able to travel, Ariel, her parents and three brothers were welcomed to the Village during her special princess wish where she fell in love with the dive-in movies. "Every moment of every day we could feel the heart of Give Kids The World," says Capri. "The spirit of every single person, event and experience shines through at GKTW to let you know that you are loved, you are seen and you are cared for. Thank you for granting Ariel's wish, giving her a star to come back to, and giving all of us memories to cherish." To make a donation that will help fulfill wishes for families like Ariel's, visit www.gktw.org/donate.

Village News

COMING TOGETHER TO CREATE HAPPINESS AND HOPE

Give Kids The World is made possible by the support of countless generous donors, corporate sponsors and volunteers.

Avalee's Special Connection

Diagnosed with kidney cancer at just six months old, Avalee Byrd became dialysis dependent three months later when aggressive chemotherapy treatment was unsuccessful – leading to the life-saving removal of both kidneys. Once her condition stabilized and oncologists believed her cancer would not return, they suggested she receive a kidney transplant. Avalee's father was determined to be a good candidate to donate to Avalee, and on August 19, 2019, Avalee received a kidney from her father. Once she was able to travel, Avalee and her family enjoyed a visit to the Village. "This trip gave our family the only vacation we have had since Avalee's diagnosis," says Avalee's mom, Stacy. "Although she has had the transplant, she is still admitted often. The road has been long, but Avalee is such a fighter with an empathetic spirit. Both kids had so much fun; thank you so much for giving our family such a wonderful gift and allowing us to be part of the Give Kids The World family!"



Holiday Soiree

Mark your calendars for Saturday, November 9, 2024, when Give Kids The World hosts its annual Holiday Soiree on-site at the Village surrounded by glittering lights. Celebrate the season during a magical evening featuring live entertainment, dazzling décor, delicious dining, festive holiday music, a charity auction and activities that help guests experience the fun and excitement wish families enjoy during their once-in-a-lifetime dream vacations. Information about tickets, sponsorships and VIP packages will be announced shortly.

Piggy Paint

Piggy Paint is giving wish families something to squeal about! Thanks to the company's tremendous generosity, wish children and their siblings can glam up with beautiful, vibrantly colored manicures in Twinkle Hope's Rockin' Spa using Piggy Paint's water-based, non-toxic, odorless, chemical/cruelty/gluten-free, vegan nail polish and nail art. Piggy Paint's commitment to safety, quality and innovation – featuring a palette of more than 200 colors – has earned it a cult following and rave reviews from both children and adults. We are grateful to founder Melanie Hurley (AKA Queen Piggy) and her wonderful team for helping to make wishes extra magical through Piggy Paint's amazing donation.



Coasting for Kids

One of our most exhilarating and popular fundraisers is back this year: Coasting for Kids: The Inversion Tour! In addition to experiencing the thrill and excitement of their favorite local theme park attractions, participants can enjoy one-of-a-kind behind-the-scenes experiences, giving them a front seat ride to witness the magic behind classic coasters at each park on the tour while scoring exclusive perks and cool Coasting for Kids swag. Best of all, proceeds from the event benefit the Village, helping us create magical wish vacations for children with critical illnesses and their families. Visit www.gktw.org/coaster to register.



Gingerbread Run: Under The Lights

Sneakers + Whimsy = Hope! More than 900 fundraisers converged on Give Kids The World in February to run, roll or stroll a 5K or one-mile family fun run throughout the Village, while hundreds more participated virtually – collectively raising \$209,000 to make wishes possible. With wish families cheering them on, participants immersed themselves in the childlike wonder of the Village as they wound their way past storybook villas, the world’s largest game of CANDY LAND and iconic landmarks including the Castle of Miracles and Henri’s Starlite Scoops. Those who missed the event have another chance to join in the fun as the Village hosts its second Gingerbread Run of 2024 on Saturday, November 23 – this time under the holiday lights! To register to fundraise and learn more, visit www.gktw.org/gingerbreadrun.



Written In The Stars

After meeting in Japan during their respective deployments in the United States Marines, Jeff and Amy Patterson welcomed sons Sean and Christopher – both of whom were born without functioning immune systems (primary immunodeficiency/PI) and other life-threatening illnesses, believed to be due to their parents’ exposure in the service during the Gulf War. Having spent their lives in and out of the hospital, including weekly plasma infusions, both boys were thrilled to be granted wishes. In December 2016, youngest son Christopher’s wish to meet Magic Mickey from The Sorcerer’s Apprentice was fulfilled during an unforgettable stay at the Village. Making the visit even more memorable, Christopher was able to place his star in the Castle of Miracles right next to the star of his cousin and namesake, Christopher Hart! Almost 20 years earlier, Christopher Hart had visited the Village during his battle with a rare brain tumor, but had not placed a star in the Castle. The week before Christopher Patterson’s wish trip, his cousin was welcomed home to the Village for the first time since his wish, when his star finally joined our galaxy in the Star Tower. Two GKTW warriors 20 years apart, but only one star away!

GKTW Alumni Club

More than 2,500 Alumni wish families have already joined the Village’s new Give Kids The World Alumni Club! Designed to help families stay connected to the Village and each other, the club provides members with exciting opportunities to attend fun events, share our mission in the community, attend bi-monthly meetings, enjoy camaraderie during exclusive Alumni Club social events, and fundraise to make wishes possible. Members also have the chance to be part of the Alumni Club Starlite Committee – serving as ambassador leaders by helping to spearhead fundraising events, coordinate Alumni meet-ups and cultivate partnerships with local businesses and community groups. There is no membership fee, and members can participate as much or as little as they’d like.

To join or learn more, visit www.gktw.org/alumniclub/. To join the Alumni Club’s official Facebook group, visit www.facebook.com/groups/gktwalumniclub.

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Acrylic Picture Frame

Our beautiful new Give Kids The World Village acrylic picture frame brings whimsy and wonder into your home or office. The 7 x 9-inch frame holds one horizontal photo – perfect for memorializing your favorite Village experience or giving as a gift. Proceeds from the purchase of this and other high-quality merchandise in our Memory Market will make dreams come true for children with critical illnesses and their families from around the world.

To shop online, visit www.gktw.org/shop.



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