VOLUME ONE

Akron Children's

More childhood, please.™

A MAGAZINE FROM AKRON CHILDREN'S

A LETTER FROM CHRIS GESSNER

Dear friends,

Every day, I am reminded of how fortunate we are at Akron Children's to make a difference in the lives of kids by ensuring they can reach their full potential. From patient care to advocacy, research and community education, everyone at Akron Children's aims to help every child have the best childhood. That's why you'll hear us say we provide "more childhood." It's not just the title of our new magazine or a slogan – it's our purpose.

In our first issue, you'll read inspiring stories about several of our patients, such as Penelope, who had a liver transplant before her first birthday – and Gianna, who battled back from long COVID to achieve success in cross-country. You'll also be inspired by Akron Children's Pediatrics doctor Mark Redding, whose legacy of healing lives on through his daughter, who now cares for his patients, years after his passing.

Every story in this magazine is meant to give you, our readers, a glimpse into the many ways we work tirelessly to ensure our patients achieve more childhood within our walls and in their day-to-day lives.

I hope you enjoy our inaugural issue.

Warm regards,

Chris

Chris Gessner,
President and CEO

Akron Children's

Akron Children's mission is to improve the health of children, teenagers and young adults through excellence in patient care, education, research, advocacy and community partnerships.

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A medical miracle

How the partnership between Akron Children's and Cincinnati Children's saved Penelope

Surrounded by toys on her living room floor, Penelope has discovered the joys of clapping and walking, loves being around her brother and has a lot to say about the first 12 months of her life.

Young Penelope's journey to this point is nothing short of a miracle.

by CASEY NEWMAN

Alarming diagnoses signal the need for surgery

Penelope's body began to indicate something was wrong when she was just 4 days old. The jaundice that most newborns experience after birth wasn't getting better.

"We came home on a Sunday, and when we woke up on Monday, the whites of her eyes were yellow," Penelope's mom, Dominica, recalled.

Alarmed, Dominica called the pediatrician who saw Penelope at the hospital where Dominica gave birth. The doctor advised the family to get Penelope seen that day.

Penelope's pediatrician told her family they'd monitor her condition and sent her home.

At home, Dominica noticed Penelope was constantly hungry and struggled to stay nourished.

Concerned that Penelope was getting dehydrated and worried about her weight gain, Dominica took her to Akron Children's. There, they did a scan of her gallbladder and noticed a problem with her bile ducts.

Reinaldo Garcia-Naveiro, MD, a pediatric gastroenterologist at Akron Children's, diagnosed Penelope with biliary atresia.

Biliary atresia is a condition in which the bile ducts are blocked, preventing them from sending bile from the liver to the small intestine. Because the bile can't leave the liver, the liver can quickly become damaged. It's the most common reason for a liver transplant in babies and children. Penelope's biliary atresia eventually led to the need for a liver transplant.

"It was hard to understand the extent of how severe it was," Dominica said of her daughter's condition.

Dr. Garcia-Naveiro recommended blood work, additional diagnostic tests, and after biliary atresia was confirmed, the Kasai procedure.

The Kasai procedure is usually the first line of treatment for infants with biliary atresia. This surgery – which involves removing a baby's blocked liver ducts and replacing them with a section of the small intestine – makes a new path for bile to drain. While it doesn't cure the condition, it can slow the damage caused and delay or prevent the need for a liver transplant.

At 42 days old, when her medical team began the procedure, they were surprised by what they found.

"They found out she also had a malrotation where her intestines were floating inside her abdomen," Dominica recalled. "So, they had to go and attach her intestines to the side of her abdomen."

Dr. Garcia-Naveiro recommended Penelope also see his colleague Akihiro Asai, MD, a hepatologist at Cincinnati Children's, because of his expertise in liver conditions.

An innovative, lifesaving partnership

In early 2024, Akron Children's and Cincinnati Children's announced their partnership to provide complex care in several medical specialties, including pediatric otolaryngology (ear, nose and throat), hepatology (liver disease) and bone marrow transplant.

"We know how important the relationship is between a patient and their care team, and now our patients in ENT, hepatology and bone marrow transplant will have access to Cincinnati Children's specialists at Akron Children's locations," said Chris Gessner, Akron Children's president and CEO, when the partnership was announced.

As a result of the collaboration, members of the Akron Children's and Cincinnati Children's medical staff share time on both campuses as the organizations coordinate the delivery of specialty care for patients. In addition, specialty services will be made accessible via telemedicine.

"The communication between Akron Children's and Cincinnati Children's was great. We had a whole team waiting to help us," said Dominica.

While Penelope recovered from the Kasai procedure, her heart rhythms concerned Dominica. She shared her concerns with Penelope's medical team. When Penelope was 3 months old, she underwent heart surgery to correct a ventricular septal defect (VSD).

> "The communication between Akron Children's and Cincinnati Children's was great. We had a whole team waiting to help us."
>
> *– Dominica, Penelope's mom*

All smiles

Penelope is all smiles following her heart surgery to correct a ventricular septal defect (VSD) at 3 months old.

A VSD is a hole in the lower chambers of the heart. Penelope's VSD was causing her to not gain weight, even after her procedure. Watching her daughter go through so much at such a young age was stressful for Dominica, as it would be for any parent. She wondered if Penelope was destined to be in and out of the hospital for most of her life.

"I was mentally struggling, wondering if she would ever get better," Dominica said. "I was thinking, 'Is she just going to be constantly in the hospital and constantly being under for a surgery? Is this how her life is going to be?'"

Penelope and her family visited Dr. Asai at Cincinnati Children's and began discussing a possible liver transplant when she was 6 months old. It was when they returned home to Akron that Penelope's condition worsened, and Penelope flew to Cincinnati Children's for her transplant.

When Penelope arrived in Cincinnati, her medical team put her on continuous dialysis and a ventilator, hoping she would stabilize so she could have the transplant. She also was placed on a Molecular Adsorbent Recirculating System, or MARS machine, to flush the toxins from her liver.

Eventually, Penelope stabilized enough for surgery, and the medical team received word that a liver the perfect match and size for Penelope was available. So, at midnight on an early spring day, 8-month-old Penelope was taken to the operating room for liver transplant surgery.

Growing and thriving one day at a time

Penelope's surgery was a success, and she began to recover and thrive."It was a relief to know the transplant had taken place and to not see her on all the machines she had been on before," Dominica said of the first time seeing her daughter post-transplant.

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A milestone follow-up

Penelope and her family meet with Dr. Asai (left) at a follow-up appointment in Akron. The appointment marked five-months post-transplant for Penelope.

Penelope receives her follow-up care at Akron Children's, where Dr. Asai sees patients each month, minimizing the young family's travel to Cincinnati Children's.

Following her transplant, Penelope spent most of her time at home to protect her fragile immune system and only left the house for numerous medical appointments. Now, her appointments are less frequent, and her family feels that's a mark of her progress.

"Penelope's appointments are becoming less frequent, and it's exciting to see how well she's doing and how far she's come from where we had started a year ago," said Dominica.

"Without the wonderful staff at Akron Children's and Cincinnati Children's, we could have never had this happen," said Pamela Billups, Penelope's grandmother. "They worked together; they were very in sync with each other. We had fantastic doctors in both places. They treated us like family, and that's how we managed to get through this whole ordeal."

Penelope's fighting spirit was evident throughout everything she's been through, and her family wants others who are experiencing the same thing to always have hope.

"I want people to know that even though things are bleak, and it doesn't look good, and you hear the worst of the worst, there's always hope. Penelope is definitely proof of that," Pamela said. "Never give up; there's always hope."

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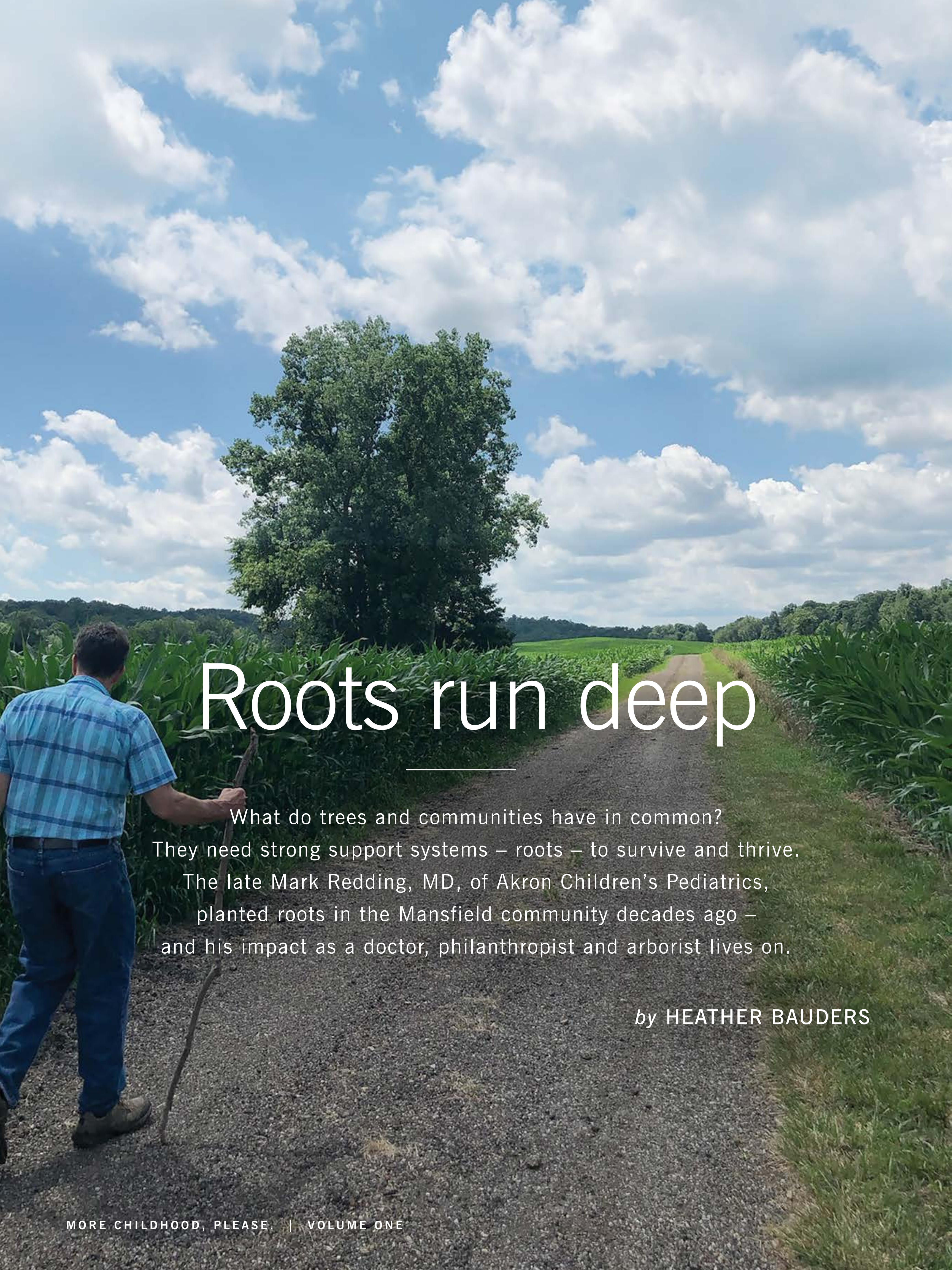
A good friend

Dominica holds Penelope while she pets her dog, Bjorn.

"Without the wonderful staff at Akron Children's and Cincinnati Children's, we could have never had this happen. They worked together; they were very in sync with each other. We had fantastic doctors in both places. They treated us like family, and that's how we managed to get through this whole ordeal."

– Pamela Billups, Penelope's grandmother

Watch more of Penelope's story in this video documenting her incredible journey.



Roots run deep

What do trees and communities have in common?
They need strong support systems – roots – to survive and thrive.
The late Mark Redding, MD, of Akron Children's Pediatrics,
planted roots in the Mansfield community decades ago –
and his impact as a doctor, philanthropist and arborist lives on.

by HEATHER BAUDERS

Dr. Redding passed away unexpectedly in May 2021. His daughter, Kate Boroff, MD, is now a pediatrician at the Mansfield office where he worked. "There was a time when Dad and I talked about me coming back to Mansfield and practicing alongside him, but he passed two years before I finished my training," Dr. Boroff said. "I'm so glad I ended up coming back here to my hometown. Although I probably would've figured it out eventually, I think Dad showed me the way."

Dr. Boroff's mom, Sarah, is also a physician. The Reddings founded the nonprofit Community Health Access Project (CHAP) in Mansfield and the nationally renowned Pathways Community HUB Institute®. Partnering with community health workers and community nonprofit organizations, these programs connect underserved families to medical and behavioral health care; necessities like housing and food; and adult education and employment resources.

"Dad had huge dreams and goals; he never did anything halfway. Mom is very practical and would figure out how to make Dad's ideas happen," Dr. Boroff explained. "They always talked about CHAP and getting the program developed. Sometimes, my siblings and I wished they'd talk about something else. But, looking back, it was cool to hear those conversations."

Despite having two doctors in the house, Dr. Boroff didn't feel pressure to choose a medical career. "They were amazing doctors, but they didn't push any of us to go into medicine," she said. "They just wanted us to be happy, and they would've been excited no matter what we ended up doing."

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A legacy of caring

Dr. Boroff celebrated graduation from medical school with her siblings, Hannah and David; husband, Jacob; and parents, Sarah and Mark.

A dedicated pediatrician

Dr. Mark Redding joined Akron Children's in 2016, when Mansfield Pediatrics became part of the Akron Children's Pediatrics network.

Dr. Boroff joined Akron Children's Pediatrics, Mansfield in August 2023. People tell her that she's carrying on her dad's legacy or following in his footsteps, but she considers that impossible. "The way he did things was so special that no one could do it the same way ever again," she said. "He was so intelligent and involved in so many projects that improved our community. But what patients remember – and what they talk to me about – is how compassionate he was and his connection with them."

Dr. Redding didn't just care for his patients during office hours. "He made evening phone calls from home to check on patients, and he even had patients come to our house on weekends to take a look at them," Dr. Boroff recalled. "He was very much like a rural medicine doctor who just wanted to help people."

Dr. Redding didn't rush through appointments, and as a result, he often ran behind schedule. "He made people feel like they were the most important thing to him in that moment, which made him never on time for anything," Dr. Boroff said with a chuckle. "The nurses still talk about him running an hour behind schedule, and families getting upset. Once he walked in the exam room and greeted the families, all was forgiven. He sacrificed time management to make his patients feel important – and I use his example to make my patients feel taken care of and listened to."

Coming full circle since those early conversations around the Redding house, Dr. Boroff now refers families in need to her parents' CHAP organization. "My parents have always said that what doctors do in the office is one small piece of this big puzzle," she explained. "Many other aspects affect a child's care. We can prescribe medicine, but the parent may not have transportation to pick it up or may not be able to read and understand how to give the medicine. The family support provided by our Akron Children's social workers and the CHAP community health workers makes me feel like I can do more to help my patients."

Dr. Kate Boroff *(third from left) treats the Meltons like family – just like her dad did.*

A special bond with the Melton family

Dr. Boroff gets to care for many patients who previously saw her dad. One family is Mammie Melton and her grandkids: 17-year-old Lilly and 14-year-old Mark. “I’ve seen them a lot since joining Akron Children’s Pediatrics,” Dr. Boroff said. “It feels nostalgic when they come into the office, even though I didn’t know them when Dad was around. They knew my dad so well, and he cared about them so much.”

The feeling was mutual. “There are no words to describe what Dr. Redding meant to us,” Mammie said. “He was awesome. One of a kind. He gave me his personal phone number and said, ‘Listen to me. If it’s midnight and you need something, call me.’”

Dr. Redding specialized in caring for kids with autism, as well as behavioral and mental health issues. He was the perfect doctor for Mark, who has autism and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder. The two bonded over more than just sharing the same first name. “Dr. Redding would tell us that he loved us, and he was like a family member,” Mammie said. “When he passed, my grandkids took it hard. Lilly is quiet, so she was sad but didn’t say much. Mark wasn’t himself; he was off for quite a while.”

The Mansfield staff gave Mark the memorial photo of Dr. Redding that hung in the office waiting room. Three years after Dr. Redding’s passing, the picture still hangs on Mark’s bedroom wall.

It takes time to adjust to a new doctor, especially under the sad circumstances of Dr. Redding’s death. “I was a bit scared after he passed, and we started seeing Dr. Boroff,” Mammie shared. “But she welcomed us like she’d known us for a long time. She’s so sweet and caring, like her dad.”

The Redding family

The Redding family loved spending time together outdoors.

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Dr. Redding's roots continue to spread

Outside the office, Dr. Redding's interests included planting trees and being in nature. "Trees were a currency growing up in our family," Dr. Boroff quipped. "To get our little flip cellphones, we had to plant trees. We grew up planting a lot."

Dr. Redding planted a whopping 16,000 trees in his lifetime – including more than 14,000 on his property. "Our family tries to be environmentally friendly because of his love of nature," Dr. Boroff said. "He was passionate about electric vehicles, so my mom, sister and brother have electric cars. We have solar panels on my parents' property, and everyone recycles. We try, in our own ways, to respect Dad's focus on the environment. But we don't have the itch to plant more trees."

Although Dr. Boroff and her siblings aren't arborists like their dad, they have each carved a path that shows their dad's influence. "My sister, Hannah, is training to be a child and adolescent psychiatrist. Knowing Dad was so passionate about mental and behavioral health, it's cool she chose that field," Dr. Boroff said. "My brother, David, has Dad's laugh – and David's ability to work with kids and families at the community center resembles Dad a lot.

"I love being a pediatrician. It's so rewarding to have that connection with families, and I also feel the connection with my dad. I get to hear stories from his patients – who are now mine – and the people I work with are wonderful. The staff loved Dad, too."

Dr. Boroff misses a million things about her dad. "His advice and guidance, his laugh and his ability to lighten everything. Whether a life- or patient-related situation, he was so wise in giving advice," she shared. "It's amazing how much people have an impact on you, and that brings comfort after they're gone. You never stop missing them or recognizing how important they are."


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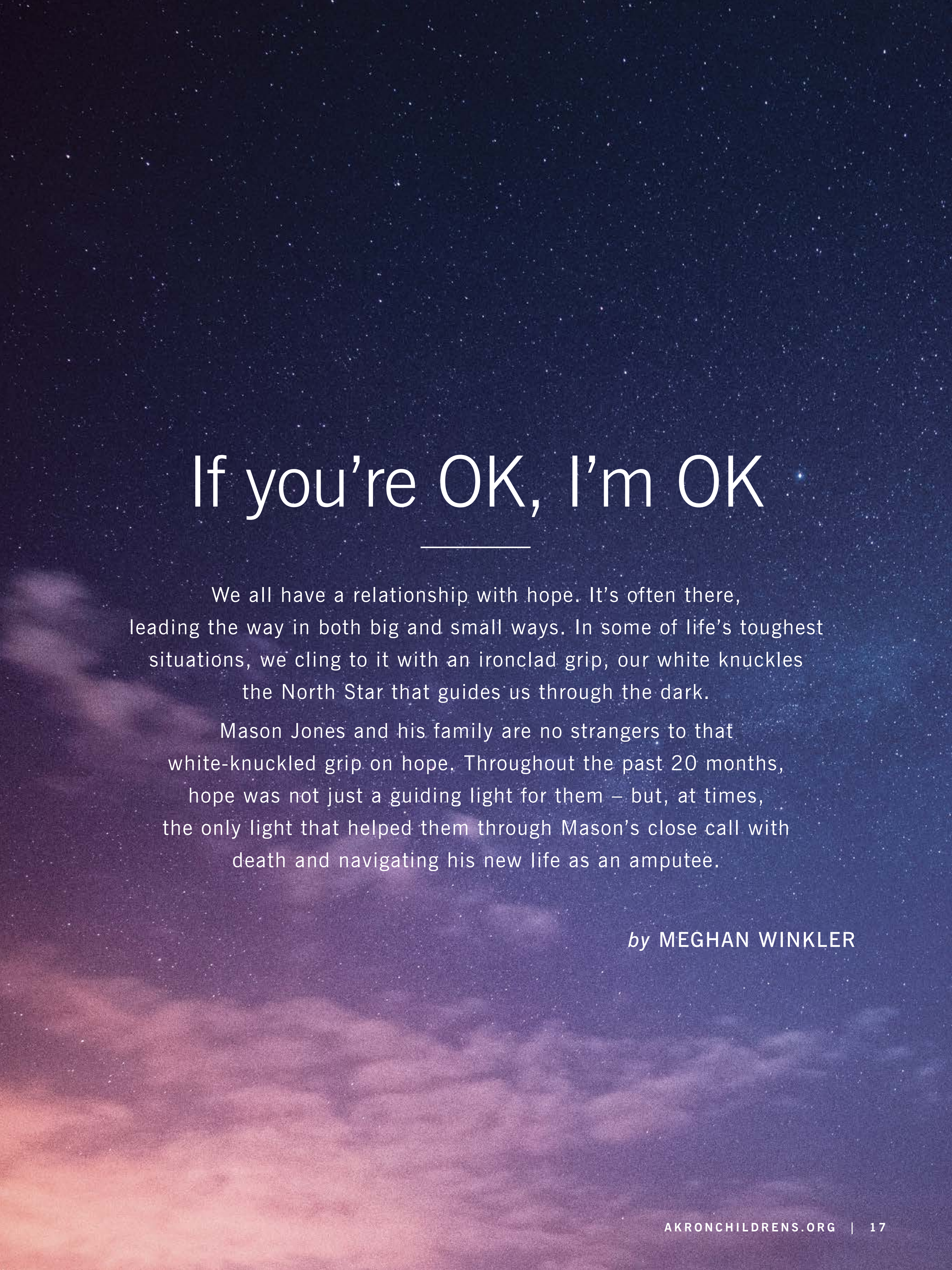

If you’re OK, I’m OK

We all have a relationship with hope. It’s often there, leading the way in both big and small ways. In some of life’s toughest situations, we cling to it with an ironclad grip, our white knuckles the North Star that guides us through the dark.

Mason Jones and his family are no strangers to that white-knuckled grip on hope. Throughout the past 20 months, hope was not just a guiding light for them – but, at times, the only light that helped them through Mason’s close call with death and navigating his new life as an amputee.

by MEGHAN WINKLER

In April 2023, 15-year-old Mason got sick with what seemed like a regular case of strep throat. But when his mom, Charde McMillan, noticed purple splotches all over his body, she knew something else was wrong.

After some blood work at their local hospital in Pearisburg, Virginia, the doctors confirmed her biggest fear: Mason was in organ failure.

“They life-flighted him to Roanoke,” Charde said, “and they weren't even sure if they could keep him alive overnight.” The doctors immediately put Mason into a medically induced coma, on life support and dialysis. Just eight hours later, he was life-flighted again to the University of Virginia Medical Center, where he would remain in a coma for more than three months.
Their family packed a bag and hit the road to be with him.

“That first night, one of the doctors told me that it was OK to have hope,” Charde reflected. At first, she worried what that meant. Was he trying to comfort her, even though he feared the worst? Ultimately, however, she realized how badly she needed it. “We held onto that hope because that's really all we had.”

Finally, after weeks of waiting while Mason was on life support, his family received a diagnosis. Mason had group A streptococcal toxic shock syndrome, which causes sepsis and organ failure, and can often be fatal.

Mason was fighting for his life.

“There were horrible feelings all day, every day,” Charde recalled. “Just this hole in your gut because you never knew, minute by minute, what was going to happen to Mason.”

As the oldest of four siblings, Mason had always been an active, ambitious kid. He enjoyed being outside hiking or biking, had a strong interest in photography and loved playing video games. Seeing her strong, independent and energetic son fighting for his life in a coma had begun to take its toll on Charde.“I couldn't sit in his room for very long, with all the horrible machines. I would have anxiety attacks. So, I spent most of my time in the waiting room.”

But Mason couldn't survive on those machines forever. His doctors warned Charde that after so long, it would begin to cause brain damage. They gave her a choice: try weaning him off the machines now and see how his body responds, or risk waiting a little longer. They chose to wean him from life support. As he was weaned, Charde and her family held firmly to whatever hope they could find. “I always have hope for him, and I always will. But it's definitely hard to hold onto when you're so helpless – when it comes to your child's life, and there is literally nothing you can do.”

Even while Mason was on life support, though, Charde suspects he sensed his family rallying behind him – a light guiding him back to them. “I'm happy we held out hope because I feel like maybe that made Mason fight a little bit harder, knowing that we were there with him.”

But they weren't through the darkness yet. After more than three months on life support, Mason had developed necrotizing fasciitis, a flesh-eating bacterial infection that destroys soft tissue and can often be fatal. The immediate action to stop the spread was to amputate Mason's hands and feet.

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The rehab team found fun ways to engage Mason *in beneficial exercises. Here, he was throwing treats for a member of the Doggie Brigade™, which often joins patients in the rehab gym to help inspire and motivate them during difficult periods of healing.*

Charde and her family worried how Mason was going to react to waking up with no hands after his first surgery. But Charde had a feeling that her son would be resilient, even in the face of such drastic change. “Mason has always looked for the light in the darkest places, and somehow, he can make any situation better. He always has.”

And Mason proved her right.

“He came out really, really positive,” said Charde. “He’s determined to get to do what he wants to do. He wants independence, and nothing is going to stop him.”

Charde was overwhelmed and scared on the day he had his feet amputated, but Mason was laughing as he was wheeled out of his room to surgery. That attitude was a game-changer for her, and he became the light that guided her.

“If he’s OK with this, then I can be OK,” she said. “It strengthens our hope to see him so determined and positive. He says, ‘Mom, don’t be upset. I’m fine.’”

Arriving at Akron Children’s

After having his hands and feet amputated, Mason was referred to Akron Children’s Adult and Pediatric Burn Institute, supported by The Paul and Carol David Foundation, for his complex and ongoing wound care. The family stayed at the Akron Ronald McDonald House for five months as they managed Mason’s wounds and worked through rehabilitation.

Within a week of being at Akron Children’s, Charde saw a huge improvement in Mason. Anjay Khandelwal, MD, director of the Burn Institute, along with his team, removed the tracheostomy and many IVs hooked to Mason. But more than anything, Charde says the team’s genuine, compassionate care was what made a big difference for them.

Dr. Khandelwal described the ability to find hope and stay motivated throughout the healing journey as an essential part of any patient’s recovery, and it is always a team effort.

> "There are days when you're devastated, and everything makes you angry. But then you see him do something amazing, like walking the first day he got his prosthetics, and you realize we're going to get through this."
>
> *– Charde McMillan, Mason's mom*

"This is more than just the physical amputations," said Dr. Khandelwal. "A lot of this is an emotional and mental journey. It's important for patients to derive strength and resilience from understanding that journey, then rely on hope while using the burn team as support."

When a patient leaves the burn unit, they're gifted a medal that honors their journey so far and what is yet to come. It prominently displays the words "COURAGE, STRENGTH, RESILIENCE and HOPE."

"I think Mason has embodied a lot of those characteristics," praised Dr. Khandelwal.

Even as Mason and his family began navigating prosthetics, wheelchairs and wound care, they were able to stay positive and resilient.

Charde said the Akron Children's rehab team really encouraged Mason to use that positive attitude and determination to keep going.

They were especially impacted by seeing doctors and caregivers with different abilities. "It shows the kids that it's possible for them to do anything, too," Charde said. "They're really positive role models for them."

That positive influence, along with the unrelenting support from his family, helped fuel Mason's positive visions for his future. He used that motivation to keep fighting.

Throughout their extended stay, Mason showed that he is still the same active, ambitious and independent teenager.

"It was still scary at times because we were entering a world we knew nothing about," Charde expressed. "It was like we were living in someone else's life. It didn't feel real. But I always had hope Mason was going to just take it and run with it. He's really proved that he's not going to let it hold him down."

Today

Now, nearly two years after Mason initially got sick, the road to recovery is far from over. The family still splits their time among Charleston, Morgantown and Akron for Mason's various procedures and rehabilitation. But Mason and his family are adjusting to their new normal and are eagerly making plans for his future.

This July, Mason will turn 18. Like every 18-year-old, independence is front of mind. "I hope to finally be able to get on with my life in the next year. I just want to be able to go out into nature whenever I feel like it, finish high school and get a job."

And that reality is getting closer and closer. Although Mason already had leg prosthetics and had begun to walk again, he had to have an additional surgery that required having his prosthetics remade.

Walking was a major milestone for Mason.

In a rehab appointment last summer, he cruised through the hallways with minimal support from his therapist. The 17-year-old is over 6 feet tall and towers over most people around him when he is standing tall in his prosthetics.

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Mason received his new prosthetics earlier this year, and he and Charde continue to visit Akron Children's for rehabilitation.

"My biggest milestone so far is most definitely walking," Mason claimed. And more milestones will come.

But, even now, Charde says her journey with hope isn't over. "There are days when you're devastated, and everything makes you angry. But then you see him do something amazing like walking the first day he got his prosthetics, and you realize we're going to get through this."

The key to getting through it? Doing it together. Even in the darkest moments, Mason and his family were not alone. They had each other, their care teams, and a whole community of friends and family supporting their journey and reminding them where to find that spark of hope to guide them through it.

To any other kid or teen who may be experiencing something big and life-changing, Mason continues to share that light by encouraging them to keep fighting. "You can do anything if you try. I thought I would never even play video games again – but here I am!"

Gianna’s got grit

Everyone loves a good comeback story, and Gianna Sabatino has one.

Her health problems started simply enough with a sore throat in December 2023. Gianna – a Girard High School sophomore at the time – competed in cross-country, soccer and track. She’d played through illness multiple times before. She expected this situation to be the same, but it wasn’t.

by HEATHER BAUDERS

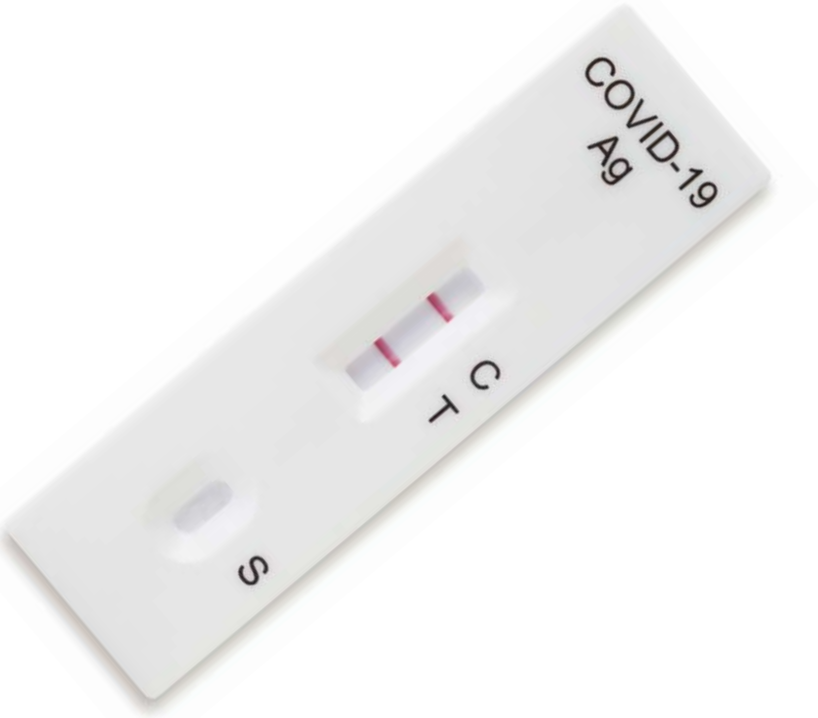
The long journey begins

"I was feeling more tired after my workouts and had a bad sore throat. Then the aches started," Gianna recalled. "I took an at-home COVID test, and it was positive." Gianna followed protocols and returned to school after testing negative for COVID. She took midterm exams and returned to the soccer field. Life was getting back to normal … or so she thought.

"I started getting chest pain," Gianna said, "and that was the first sign something wasn't right."

Other symptoms included a lump in her throat and shortness of breath. A few days after the holiday, she went to Akron Children's Pediatrics. Gianna wondered if she'd returned to school and sports too soon.

The nurse practitioner referred Gianna to Akron Children's Cardiology for tests, which came back normal, but dizziness and heart palpitations continued. "I started to feel like I might not wake up in the morning," Gianna said.



She went to her pediatrician, Destiny Jamison, MD, at Akron Children's Pediatrics in Warren. "I just wanted to help Gianna feel better and reassure her," she said. "I took as much time as she needed to talk her through her feelings and fears."

Dr. Jamison prescribed medication to reduce Gianna's anxiety. Gianna's resting heart rate was 120, and she started to have body aches. She had blood work and an ultrasound that showed she had an enlarged liver. Dr. Jamison then referred Gianna to Gastroenterology, but the liver inflammation didn't improve with dietary changes.

The diagnosis

"My sister works at Akron Children's, and her colleague suggested that we see an infectious disease specialist," Gianna's mom, Jackie, said. "We met with Eric Robinette, MD. He spent 45 minutes asking questions and intently listening. He was so calm, and he said he knew what was happening to Gianna: long COVID."

Dr. Robinette explained there wasn't much research on long COVID's effects on younger patients, but he expected Gianna to return to normal in 8-12 months. "Gianna had been suffering for quite a while by the time she got to me," he said. "She was grateful for a diagnosis and plan – and relieved that her long-term prognosis was good. I emphasized we'd help her be as healthy as possible while the disease ran its course."

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Eric Robinette, MD,
gave Gianna two precious gifts: a diagnosis and hope that she'd get better.

Pacing is a technique Dr. Robinette used to get Gianna on the road to recovery. Often used for adults with chronic fatigue syndrome, pacing helps patients be as physically active as possible without overdoing it and causing a short-term setback or hurting long-term quality of life. Gianna's first pacing assignment: walk 10 minutes a day. As her body tolerated the exercise, she'd increase walking time by a few minutes.

"Gianna was exceptionally motivated to get well. She understood the steps and reasons why we did things," Dr. Robinette said. "With pacing, we helped her do something that's important to her – physical activity – but not go past the breaking point."

COVID attacked Gianna's autonomic system that controls involuntary bodily functions, including blood pressure, heart rate, digestion and breathing. She sometimes lost hope that she would ever feel better, but she kept forging ahead.

Turning the corner

In March 2024, as track practice began, she attended daily to support her teammates even though she couldn't compete. She concentrated on pacing and building stamina, and her coaches encouraged her to go at her own pace. Gianna felt better by the end of April and reached a major milestone: She started jogging again."It felt like she made the turn and was on the upswing," Jackie said. "Then our focus became: What can we do to make sure she doesn't do too much?"

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS OF LONG-TERM COVID?

Long COVID, the condition where symptoms that surface after recovering from COVID-19 linger for weeks, months or even years, is still a mystery to doctors and researchers. The symptoms, such as chronic pain, brain fog, shortness of breath, chest pain and intense fatigue, can be debilitating. Severe cases of long COVID can even affect the body's organs. But imaging tests don't always show the origins of those symptoms. And we still don't know why only some people develop the condition or why others can get it after a mild COVID infection.

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Sports rehab
Physical Therapist Nicole Bonenberger works with Gianna on core strength and stability.

Sports medicine specialist Chris Liebig, MD, who previously treated Gianna for an ankle problem, referred her to Michelle Levitt, MD, whose focus is sports health and performance. "I believe COVID hit Gianna so hard because her body was run down due to low energy availability," Dr. Levitt explained. "This is when an athlete is under-fueling – unintentionally in Gianna's case – and doesn't have enough energy available to meet the physical needs of the body for health, growth and development, and the demands of the sport. This was especially true for Gianna as a multisport athlete."

Dr. Levitt taught Gianna the right way to fuel her body, starting with a base of adequate calories and hydration. "We then worked on 'finding the fit' for her – what worked well for her body before, during and after training sessions or competitions," Dr. Levitt said. "Sleep is also vital to the healing process of the mind and body. We made sure Gianna had a solid nighttime routine to allow her brain to move out of 'fight or flight' mode and into 'rest and digest' mode."

Dr. Robinette stayed on top of Gianna's progress, affirming everything Gianna was doing would help her long-term goal of returning to sports. "We went to so many Akron Children's facilities – from Warren to Beachwood to the Akron and Boardman campuses. We were so fortunate to have a team of doctors and specialists caring for Gianna," Jackie said. "We've always used Akron Children's because they specialize in kids. They have taken great care of Gianna and her twin sister, Ava, over the years."

Conditioning for the fall cross-country season started in June. "We met with her coaches and shared a specific conditioning plan she received from her physical therapists," Jackie said. "Everyone encouraged Gianna to have the mindset that her first cross-country race is just like practice. We didn't want her pushing herself too hard and having a setback. But it was an important race for more reasons than one."

Gianna was eager for cross-country season to start. "Before I got sick, I dreaded every race because I was so run down," she shared. "When I got back, I was so excited for every race." She finished every cross-country race of the 2024 season – and earned second-team all-conference honors!

From setback to growth

After months of feeling unhealthy and countless medical appointments, Jackie and Gianna learned a lot from the experience. "I listen more to both of my girls when they are not feeling well, and I learned a lot about how to help them get proper rest and nutrition," Jackie said. "This situation also taught me to be more mindful about what people may be going through. They may look OK on the outside, but they may be suffering on the inside."

For Gianna, overcoming long COVID made her a stronger person. "I feel like I can stand up for myself and have more confidence," she shared. "I no longer settle for mediocrity and have my priorities set. I know the importance of taking care of myself."

This experience also solidified an idea Gianna had about what to do after high school. "Before I got sick, I thought about going to college to study dietetics," she said. "Now I'm really interested in the field and want to work with athletes."

Gianna's comeback is a testament to how focused she was on getting better. "She was patient, and she listened to her providers throughout the process," Dr. Robinette said. "She was determined to get better; she had such grit. I'm excited to see what happens next for her."

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Gianna's battle *against long COVID made her stronger and more confident.*

Behind the scenes

Meet the hosts of Akron Children’s new TV show

Akron Children’s launched a TV show – by and for kids – called “More childhood, please.™” earlier this year on WKYC TV. The maiden endeavor was in the young but very capable hands of its two hosts: 10-year-old Lily Goodwin and 13-year-old Rhys Thomas. Let’s meet them!

by HOLLY PUPINO

Lily Goodwin: The young DJ who has conquered CLE

Getting the gig to host the show was just the icing on the cake of a wildly successful 2024 for Lily, who is becoming an increasingly famous DJ online and at events around greater Cleveland.

Lily, known professionally as DJ Lily Jade, lives in South Euclid with her mom, Esha; dad, Juan; and younger sister, Lena. During the COVID pandemic, with the family trapped at home, Lily, then 5, started asking her father about all the music equipment in their basement.

According to Juan, there was some "trash talk" between father and daughter about who had the better taste in music – his preference is for '90s hip-hop and R&B versus Lily's love of more contemporary artists like SZA and Tyler, The Creator. Soon, they would take their "DJ battles" live on social media – and Lily started collecting fans and followers on TikTok, YouTube, Facebook and Instagram. Cleveland's WOVU 95.9 FM offered Lily her own show in 2021.

As her fame has increased, Lily had the opportunity to interview famous athletes like Kevin Love and Caitlin Clark – and bring her DJ skills to such high-profile events as a Cavs game and the Democratic National Convention in Chicago. This year, she will DJ at Severance Hall for the Cleveland Orchestra.

She was recently named one of *Cleveland Magazine*'s "Most Interesting People" for 2024 and the youngest member of *Forbes'* "30 Under 30" list. She's the youth ambassador for Cleveland Reads.

Lily joked about her mom and dad being her "momager" and "dadager," à la Kris Jenner, keeping her busy schedule on track. But they take as much pride in all the "normal" things in her life as well: basketball practice, playing the bassoon, serving on student council at school and being inducted into National Honor Society.

The opportunity to audition for the Akron Children's TV show hosting job was another good fit. Lily and her sister have long been patients of Julie McClave, MD, a pediatrician at Akron Children's Pediatrics, Mayfield Heights.

"I think the show will be great for families to sit down together to watch this, be entertained, learn together – and kids will learn by seeing from their peers," said Esha. "I think it's a great concept."

And Juan couldn't be more proud to see how far Lily has come from age 5 to now hosting her own radio and TV shows and, yes, becoming a more famous DJ than her own dad/mentor.

"I want my daughter to know that she has a voice," he said. "I've told her if you ever feel like something isn't right, when you crack that mic open, whoever is listening will hear it. But I also want her to know that comes with a responsibility. The opportunity, the responsibility and the way she's taken it by the horns … my wife and I couldn't be prouder."

Scan the QR code to watch Akron Children's show that is for kids, by kids.

A dancer and aspiring designer, Rhys Thomas is a teen drawn to creative endeavors.

The holiday season is an especially busy time for Rhys, who began ballet at age 5 and completed his fourth year starring in Canton Ballet's production of "The Nutcracker" in 2024. After taking on supporting roles, this past year he had the male lead as Fritz, as well as parts in the Soldiers, Arabian and Russian dances.

It's a passion project, especially since Rhys travels from his home in Hudson to Canton for his seven weekly classes. "The Nutcracker" rehearsals increase the commitment to six days a week during the performance season, and his training includes five weeks of intensive classes in the summer.

Even with "The Nutcracker" in full swing, Rhys' mother, Melissa, didn't hesitate when she saw the hospital was seeking young people to audition for hosts of its new TV show.

"I saw it in *Shortsheet* [Akron Children's employee newsletter]," said Melissa, a donor relations specialist for Akron Children's, "and I thought, 'This is the perfect thing for him to do.' Entertaining and performing for people is definitely something he enjoys doing."

The seventh grade honor roll student at Hudson Middle School is drawn to many activities in the arts, including ceramics, painting and crafting, and has been successfully selling his paintings for several years. He has exhibited his crafts and art at the summer Hudson art fair.

He loves sketching fashions and thinks he may want to pursue fashion design as a career.

"I got a sewing machine for my birthday," said Rhys. "My mom said she'd teach me how to use it, so, hopefully, I can start making things soon."

Rhys is also entrepreneurial. In addition to selling his paintings, he runs a babysitting business, albeit mostly in the summer as his school-year schedule is so full with dance. He is also interested in fencing, chess and photography and has trained in all these areas.

Rhys and his family – that also includes dad, Eli, and older brothers, Ethan and Cai – love to take high-adventure vacations. They recently hiked in Colorado, and the whole family made it 14,000 feet up to the summit of Quandary Peak near Breckenridge. Back in Ohio, at less taxing altitudes, Rhys is fond of riding his bike to relax. "In the summer, I really love riding my bike every day," said Rhys. "It's a 2-mile bike ride from my house to downtown Hudson, so my cousin and I will bike downtown and get coffee and go shopping."

As patients of Shaun Whisenant, MD, at Akron Children's Pediatrics in Hudson, the family likes the idea of extending the hospital brand across WKYC TV's Northeast Ohio viewership.

Rhys has enjoyed teaming up with Lily, who he describes as "super fun, nice and bubbly."

Melissa said the two of them really "fed off of each other" when interviewing the pediatric experts for the first episode.

Rhys said the first episode, which focused on screen time and social media use, made him a little more conscious about his own use and wanting to spend more time with family and friends instead of online.

He predicts the show will be a success because it's hitting the right balance between fun and education.

"There are parts where it's funny and also parts where it's sort of educational – not serious but also not super jokey," he said. "So I think the whole vibe of the show is that both adults and kids will like it and learn something along the way."

Lights. Camera. Action. *Lily Goodwin and Rhys Thomas are naturals on camera and fully committed to making the TV show a success.*

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Q&A

Meet Carly Dulabon

by BROOKE UEHLEIN

Carly Dulabon, MD, medical director for the Akron Children's Division of Breastfeeding Medicine, draws on personal experience when caring for families during one of the most vulnerable times of life. Learn what inspires her.

Q: What is breastfeeding medicine?

A: Breastfeeding medicine is a specialized area of health care that focuses on supporting breastfeeding parents and their babies to make breastfeeding a positive and fulfilling experience. We launched this division in 2024.

Q: As a provider, what led you to the path of breastfeeding medicine?

A: In 2019, I had twins who were born early at 30 weeks. They spent several weeks in the NICU. I desired to nurse them during that time, and my option was to provide pumped breast milk. I realized more breastfeeding information could be shared with families after NICU or newborns are discharged from the hospital. The more I learned, the more I wanted to help mothers and babies.

In 2021, I received International Board Certified Lactation Consultant® (IBCLC®) and North American Board of Breastfeeding and Lactation Medicine (NABBLM) certifications. This additional training has really helped me address the breastfeeding challenges of moms and their babies.

Q: The nature of breastfeeding medicine may lead to delicate conversations with families. What skills do you draw on to navigate these situations?

A: This is one of the most challenging and one of my favorite parts of this role as a provider. Having a baby is hard, and struggling with feeding brings a whole new level of emotional stress. With 90-minute appointments, that allows a lot of time for feelings to bubble up. I often share my own story with families, as I find personal experience a valuable tool. I like to let my patients know that this is hard, but we have tools to work through it together.

I hope to leave my families with a sense of peace and control. Their feeding plan should be manageable once they go home and personally designed for them. I share two goals with families: Baby needs to be fed, and everyone needs to be happy. Each of these is equally important.

Q: If mothers are nervous about seeking breastfeeding medicine appointments, what encouraging advice would you give to them?

A: We feel strongly that all mothers should make an appointment with our team. Even if things are going well, we know tricks and tips that can make things easier. We don't ever want our families to feel pressured to do anything they can't or don't want to do.

A lot of people are hesitant to make appointments because they're not sure they want to breastfeed at all, and that's OK! We can help make any feeding plan or recommendations to meet a family's wishes and needs.

Q: How long have you worked at Akron Children's?

A: I've been with Akron Children's for seven years. I'm a native of Northeast Ohio, growing up in Solon.

Q: What do you do enjoy doing when you are not working?

A: I love spending time at home with my husband and our three boys: 5-year-old twins and our 2-year-old. I enjoy exercising, reading and crossword puzzles.

Q: What piece of advice did someone give you when you were young that still resonates with you today?

A: My father once said to me, "Your parents can teach you who you want to be, and who you don't want to be." I think this resonates with me at home and at work. Seeing new parents every day, I would love to give them the confidence to be strong, loving, caring parents while decreasing the stress and hardships of new parenting.

Appointments with Dr. Dulabon *may be made at the Akron campus and the Boston Heights Health Center or by scheduling a virtual telehealth visit via MyChart.*

Life lessons

In his 30-year career as a pediatric critical care physician, Dr. Michael Forbes has impacted the lives of thousands of babies and children hospitalized with serious illness or injury. It was a difficult decision to give that up as he accepted an offer to move into an administrative role at Akron Children's.

Now, as the organization's first-ever chief academic officer, Dr. Forbes' day-to-day decisions impact more than individual patients. In fact, they have the power to impact patients he will never personally meet.

"Our biggest priority is to use research to improve how we take care of patients and to continue to elevate our academic profile through innovative and new medical education programs," said Dr. Forbes.

by HOLLY PUPINO

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Becoming a physician *was not a straight path for Dr. Forbes, who was one of 10 children raised in Brooklyn. Everyone needs helpers in their lives, he believes.*

Humble roots

From a family of 10 children, Dr. Forbes was born in Jamaica and raised in Brooklyn, New York. His path to becoming a physician leader at a children's hospital was anything but ordained.

He has been open in telling people that at one point in his youth, he was a "bona fide knucklehead" who got in with a gang and saw the senseless loss of young life and the cycle of retribution.

It took the support of his "village" – a high school counselor who saw his potential; a special program for underachieving students created by Black faculty members at the University of Pittsburgh; his wife, Yolanda, whom he met in a chemistry class; among others – to get him on track for college and medical school success.

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A highly respected clinician *during his three decades in the PICU, Dr. Forbes always made time for research. Now he leads it as chief academic officer for the hospital.*

From 'a complete unknown' to a perfect fit

After a successful career as a critical care physician at UPMC Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh and Allegheny General Hospital, Dr. Forbes interviewed with the Cleveland Clinic in 2006. While there, a physician recruiter from Akron Children's contacted him. He didn't know Akron had a children's hospital, and as a die-hard Pittsburgh Steelers fan, was skeptical of any city that didn't have a professional sports team.

But he came and met with Jim Besunder, MD, and John Pope, MD, who led Akron Children's Pediatric Intensive Care Unit (PICU). After observing rounds, he knew he would fit in and be challenged by the high acuity. More importantly for his work/life balance, he would be joining a bigger team of attending physicians, promising fewer "on-call" days than the "every-other-week" schedule he was practicing.

During his tenure in the PICU, Dr. Forbes quickly became a doctor known for his compassionate care, his willingness to take on research projects and his concern for the impact of the daily stress of critical care on his fellow doctors and nurses. The PICU team too often cares for children who do not survive childhood, and even more difficult, are the victims of abuse and neglect.

During those years, he gave great thought to the impact of a PICU admission on the entire family. It might be a young child immobilized by dozens of tubes and lifeless in a medically induced coma, but the lives of her parents and siblings were equally traumatized by the experience.

Pictured with the retired director of pediatric intensive care, *James Besunder, MD, Dr. Forbes is a respected physician leader who has developed close relationships with patients and colleagues alike.*

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Dr. Forbes coined the phrase "blast radius" to describe this impact of a child's serious illness on the entire family and even beyond.

There's no doubt that such sensitivity to his patient's full story – their ZIP code, socioeconomics and family dynamics – comes not just from classrooms, his pediatric residency and fellowship, but also from life experiences.

And as an ordained minister, it's in his nature to preach the word that we don't have to travel difficult paths alone. It's easy to offer help, to mentor and to value the differences in others.

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Dr. Forbes says research *is the key to finding the most effective treatments and delivering the best care for Akron Children's patients.*

A triple threat

Michael Bigham, MD, who worked alongside Dr. Forbes for years as an attending physician in the PICU, describes him as "one of the most gifted clinicians I've had the chance to work alongside." And, if that wasn't enough "rarified air," Dr. Bigham said his colleague had the genuine empathy and communication skills to help families through the worst situations imaginable.

Now, they work together on the hospital leadership team. Dr. Bigham, now chief quality officer, has had a front-row seat watching his friend and mentor move into his leadership roles.

"Dr. Forbes has proven his commitment to teaching across the health care continuum. Whether he is teaching a seasoned physician or nurse, or a student or resident, his passion is exceptional," he said. "Talented clinicians and educators are tough to find in the same person, but Dr. Forbes also exemplifies a third exceptional skill – that of scientist. Overarching and perhaps driving the unique balance of clinician, educator and scientist is the character that is Mike Forbes. He is one of the finest human beings I know inside or outside of health care."

Research can keep kids healthy and out of the hospital

After serving as president of Akron Children's Medical Staff and the associate chair and Noah Miller Chair of Pediatric Medicine, Dr. Forbes was named chief academic officer in 2022. He knows his mission.

Alexis, age 14

After a surgery for her cerebral palsy, Alexis was finally able to achieve her dream of visiting a water park. But childhood didn't stop while Alexis underwent treatment. That's because Akron Children's provides everything from therapy dogs to end-of-treatment cakes to ensure kids never miss a moment of childhood. And these everyday moments are funded by donors like you.

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From NICU patient to Magnet Nurse of the Year

by ALISON OYLER

Nurse practitioner Leah Rawdon is known on her team as the fixer. When she sees a problem, she responds. It's an innate quality that makes her a dedicated provider for her patients and an impactful leader for her fellow advanced practice providers (APPs).

"Whether it's reassuring a parent who's feeling overwhelmed, making a sick child feel more comfortable or advocating for the APPs on my team, I love making a difference," Leah said. "For me, it's all about meeting people where they are and responding to their needs."

Connected to Children's from the start

Leah's journey with Akron Children's began long before her nursing career. Born at 28 weeks' gestation, Leah spent more than two months in the hospital's neonatal intensive care unit (NICU).

"My family often jokes that I've been connected to Akron Children's from the very start of my life," she said. "My mom had preeclampsia, so they delivered me early to save her life. I was her one and only miracle baby.

"To be a 28-weeker nearly 40 years ago is a lot different than it is today," she added. "Later, when I worked as a NICU nurse, I could draw on that experience. I reassured parents that I was here as a preemie, too, and now I'm an adult who's a nurse."

Leah returned to Children's as a teen volunteer, where she saw the hospital's supportive and kid-friendly atmosphere. "Kids played wiffle ball in the hallway, rode scooters and pulled wagons," Leah recalled. "Even though these children were really sick, the hospital created a positive environment for them. That made a lasting impression on me and confirmed I wanted to pursue a career in pediatrics."

During her senior year of high school, she became ill following a surgery. That's when Leah discovered her true calling: nursing.

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The fixer

During Leah Rawdon's 19-year career at Akron Children's, she has worked to meet her patients' needs and create solutions to reduce the length of hospital stays.

"The nurse who cared for me during that difficult time was amazing," she said. "I know the doctor prescribed the medications that improved my condition, but to me, it was the nurse who truly made me feel better. Her kindness left a lasting impact on me."

Pursuing her passion

Leah joined Akron Children's as a nurse tech in 2006 while pursuing her nursing degree at Kent State University. She went on to earn master's and doctoral degrees in nursing.

During her 18-year career, Leah has made remarkable contributions that expanded the scope of practice for APPs and improved patient outcomes. For example, she helped to develop the hospital's Short Stay Unit, which helps patients who are medically ready for discharge get home sooner.

"Leah thrives in challenging situations and is never afraid to think outside the box," Brittany Potts, MD, medical director, Pediatric Hospital Medicine and Advance Practice Providers, said. "This program resulted in a significant decrease in the amount of time our patients stay in the hospital after they are medically ready for discharge," Dr. Potts added. "This gets kids home, where they should be, sooner."

Nationally, Leah established the first APP subcommittee through the American Academy of Pediatrics. The committee provides resources and continuing education for APPs across the country.

Magnet Nurse of the Year

When she's not caring for patients, Leah explores the great outdoors with her husband and three daughters. "Working in health care can be stressful at times, but being able to step away and spend time with my family in beautiful places helps me recharge and stay grounded," she said. "Nature has a way of putting things into perspective and reminding me why I do what I do."

During her family's trip to Olympic National Park last summer, Leah received a call that she earned the prestigious 2024 Magnet Nurse of the Year in Empirical Outcomes award. This recognition from the American Nurses Credentialing Center goes to a nurse who has improved patient care through intentional interventions. While the award marks a milestone achievement in her nursing career, Leah credits her team for helping her get there.

"My success is a result of the incredible people around me: my family, senior leadership, physicians and especially the APPs in our department," Leah shared. "They pushed me to think bigger and gave me the support to do so. I wish this award could go to all the APPs in our department because they work extremely hard for our patients and each other."

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Health system happenings …

Akron Children's continues to expand its kid-focused services throughout Ohio

New Medina Health Center to open in April 2025

This spring, Akron Children's will consolidate its three Medina offices into a larger, 32,000-square-foot building at 3778 Medina Road.

The new Akron Children's Health Center at the Summa Health Medina Medical Center will offer pediatric primary care and specialty services such as allergy and immunology, cardiology, dermatology, rehab services, orthopedics and sports medicine. In its first year, the Medina Health Center will serve more than 9,000 patients.

Akron Children's and Cincinnati Children's expand collaboration to elevate pediatric heart care

Akron Children's and Cincinnati Children's have partnered for more than a decade to care for patients in need of kidney transplants. In 2024, the two organizations expanded the collaboration to include ear, nose and throat; liver disease; bone marrow transplants; and now, cardiology.

As part of the collaboration, the Akron Children's and Cincinnati Children's teams will meet regularly to discuss patients with complex heart conditions and create customized treatment plans. This includes children with new heart-related diagnoses, as well as congenital heart defects detected during testing before a baby is born.

In rare instances when a patient treated at the Akron Children's Heart Center has a condition beyond the surgical scope of Akron Children's, the family has the option for surgery at Cincinnati Children's – all follow-up care provided by the cardiologists and nurses in Akron Children's network who the family have come to know and trust since diagnosis.

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Tara Karamlou, MD, *of Cincinnati Children's, a highly skilled pediatric cardiothoracic surgeon, will work alongside Akron Children's surgeons to support continued growth in the surgical program.*

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