

More childhood, please.TM

A MAGAZINE FROM AKRON CHILDREN'S

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clubfeet and clefts
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for his close-up
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Dereon, age 17 |
of Akron



Akron
Children's



A letter from Chris Gessner

Dear friends,

Welcome to the second issue of *More childhood, please*. This magazine is one way we keep you connected to the inspiring people, stories and care that shape your experience with Akron Children's.

In this issue, you'll see powerful images from Ted Stevens, whose role as a hospital photographer allows him the privilege of capturing moments with our patients and families that show what care and healing look like up close.

You'll also meet Anna Daugherty, who was born with a heart defect that required surgery when she was 7 months old. Anna's story is a reminder of how important coordinated, specialized care is in those early days and months of life — and how strong even our smallest patients are in the face of a complex diagnosis.

We're also sharing the story of Sophia Adkins, who was diagnosed with Celiac disease at our Gastroenterology office in Marietta. Thanks to her care team, Sophia is back to enjoying the activities she loves, playing softball and being a member of her school's dance team.

At Akron Children's, our goal is to give kids, teens and young adults more of what they deserve: more time to play, learn, grow and just be kids. That means offering the right care at the right time, close to home, and supporting families every step of the way.

We appreciate your continued trust and support.

Warm regards,

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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Tiny heart; mighty fight

Peering out the bay window of her living room, 4-year-old Anna Daugherty is the picture of health with a bright smile and giggly personality. Few would guess the dress she's wearing today — pink tulle adorned with sequined butterflies — hides the scars of a battle she fought before her first birthday.

by Kathy Johnson





With surgery long behind her, Anna is meeting all her age-appropriate developmental milestones. She enjoys dancing, singing, dressing up, looking at books and riding her bike. She's an especially good mommy to her baby dolls!

A hidden problem

Anna entered the world in October 2021, the first child of parents Abi and Jack Daugherty. Both nurses at Akron Children's, they were surprised when Anna's pediatrician kept mentioning a heart murmur that wasn't going away during her first month of life. Referred to Akron Children's Heart Center for further testing, Abi wasn't overly concerned.

"I almost didn't go to the appointment because she was completely asymptomatic," said Abi, clinical coordinator in the Akron Children's Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU) at Summa. "We see transient – temporary and harmless – murmurs all the time in the NICU. They can be very common.

"I thought, am I really going to take my 1-month-old daughter to an echocardiogram (echo) that's going to take two hours only for them to give me a high five and send me on my way?" she added.

While she did end up keeping the appointment, Abi was unconcerned enough that she told her husband to stay home.

During Anna's imaging test, Abi, who has seen her share of echos at work, caught on that there was some mixing of blood in Anna's heart that probably wasn't

supposed to be there. Afterward, Abi sat down with Stephen Manu, MD, a pediatric cardiologist. He explained Anna had a heart defect called atrioventricular (AV) canal, a large hole between her upper heart chambers, or atria, and a very tiny defect between her lower chambers, or ventricles.

The defect also affected Anna's mitral valve leaving a gap, or "cleft," in the valve that would leave her with a leaky valve if not repaired. She would need surgery before she turned 1. The timing, Dr. Manu explained, was important.

"As she got older and more active, recovery would be harder," Abi said. "It made sense to do it before she started walking or showing symptoms."

Looking back, Abi and Jack said there may have been subtle signs they missed.

"Anna was small on the growth chart and very fussy," said Jack, a Pediatric Intensive Care Unit (PICU) staff nurse. "We thought it was colic, but now we wonder if it was related to her heart."

Waiting, watching — and praying

While they waited for Anna to grow, cardiology experts followed her closely. Every few months, she underwent routine imaging to ensure her defect wasn't progressing too fast or negatively impacting her.

"I was so impressed with the ultrasound technicians at Akron Children's," said Abi. "They were patient and kind. They played with Anna; had games, toys and snacks on hand; and put on her favorite shows."

Anna's surgery took place May 12, 2022.

The Daughertys appreciated that the surgical team took the time to introduce themselves — from Anna's cardiovascular surgeon, Dr. Robert Stewart, to the anesthesiologist and nurses who would be in the operating room.

Dr. Stewart explained, "We repaired her heart through her breastbone and had to place her on a heart-lung bypass machine

“It just felt like everywhere we turned there was someone we knew from somewhere willing to care for us, love us and come alongside us. It was amazing.”

- Jack, Anna's father

to allow us to operate inside her heart.”

“We closed the large hole with a patch made from her own heart sack and repaired the cleft in her mitral valve with very fine stitches,” he added. “The hole in her lower chamber was so small we decided to leave it alone.”

As Abi sat in the surgical waiting room, she said it was strange to think about the fact that her daughter’s heart wasn’t beating while she was on bypass.

“We had family come and sit with us all day. We prayed,” she said. “Whatever the outcome, that outcome wasn’t up to us. We had to trust that God had Anna every step of the way.”

They also felt deep support from their work family at Akron Children’s NICU at Summa.

“I had used family medical leave and all of my PTO for my maternity leave,” said Abi. “My manager helped me get personal leave — and my co-workers covered my shifts and took up a collection for us. It’s a huge testament to the kinds of people Akron Children’s hires.”

“I was still in nursing school at the time of Anna’s surgery, and one of my nursing instructors took care of Anna in the PICU,” said Jack. “It just felt like everywhere we turned there was someone we knew from somewhere willing to care for us, love us and come alongside us. It was amazing.”

Back home

Anna spent two days in the PICU before being discharged home.

“It was wild being home, looking at her chest and realizing she just had open-heart surgery two days ago,” Abi said. “We had to be careful how we picked her up due to sternal precautions, but she settled back into her routine quickly.”

Within a month, Anna was drinking more from her bottle and gaining weight. She moved from the 25th percentile to the 50th.

“As soon as they fixed her heart, she gained weight,” said Jack. “That probably wasn’t a coincidence.”

“They say kids are resilient — and she really was,” Abi said. “She bounced back quickly. You’d never know she went through something so traumatic.”

Marking childhood milestones

Today, Anna is hitting all her developmental milestones. She sees her cardiologist, J.R. Bockoven, annually for a checkup. Though she still has a very small ventricular septal defect (VSD) and a murmur, neither currently requires treatment.

“She will never need to have anything done about her VSD, and while her mitral valve works great now, she will need to have echocardiogram tests throughout her life to monitor its function,” said Dr. Stewart.

In 2024, the Daughertys welcomed their second child, a son named Nathan. They say Anna’s health journey has changed the way they view parenting. Though her heart carries a scar, it’s a gentle reminder of all the laughter, growth and more childhood to come.

“As medical professionals, it’s easy to think we have more control than we do,” Abi said. “But as parents, we’ve learned how much is truly out of our hands. In our profession, we’ve seen how much worse it can be. It’s made us grateful for the health our kids do have.”

Abi gets to hold Anna for the first time following her surgery at 7 months old to repair her heart defect.



Beachwood urgent care offers convenience and kindness

by Heather Bauders

It's amazing what some smiles, ice pops and magnets will do. For Danielle McGreevey, those simple things have transformed how her kids feel about going to the doctor.

In 2024, Akron Children's expanded its Beachwood services to include pediatric urgent care. Danielle heard about the new service through a friend, and it didn't take long for her kids to have a need.

"My 6-year-old son, London, was terrified about going to the doctor," Danielle shared. "He had such a good experience the first time he went to Akron Children's Urgent Care that he wanted to go back. He even woke up one morning and told me he had strep throat and needed to go to urgent care, even though he was feeling fine."



From kind staff members to ice pops and magnets, Monroe (L) and London (R) enjoy the experience of going to Akron Children's Urgent Care.

London and his 9-year-old sister, Monroe, enjoy being greeted by the friendly urgent care front-desk staff. The medical assistants and doctors specialize in caring for kids — unlike other Cleveland-area urgent cares that treat adults and children — and it's a difference Monroe and London can feel. They also like being rewarded with ice pops after their visits.

Danielle has taken the kids to Akron Children's Urgent Care for everything from the flu to rashes and minor injuries. "I wish we didn't have to go there so often," she quipped. "But it's great that the service is quick, they have on-site X-rays, and they're open in the evenings and on weekends. If it's something small, I like that I don't have to pull my kids out of school to go to the doctor."

When they go to urgent care, Monroe and London receive plenty of kindness. They also love the round magnets with the urgent care phone number that families can take. "London plays with the magnets and places them around our house," Danielle said.

"He even put one on his school bus."

In addition to going to urgent care, the kids are patients at the Akron Children's Pediatrics office in Beachwood. "They've been going to Dr. Julie Hertzner since they were born," Danielle said. "We live in Moreland Hills, which is about 7 minutes away from Beachwood. It's great to have our pediatrician — and now urgent care — so close to home."

Urgent care's availability seven days a week is a really convenient thing to offer families."



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gastroenterology)

Plastic and
reconstructive surgery

Radiology

Urgent care

Urology





Marty Joe overcomes clubfeet and clefts

Martin Joseph Kurowski — or Marty Joe — is a busy 2-year-old. He loves to run, climb and play with his toys. To look at him, you'd never know all he's overcome.

by Heather Bauders _____

A shocking diagnosis

Marty was diagnosed in utero with clubfeet and a cleft lip. “You want the best for your baby, and there’s so much anticipation,” his mom, Cortney, said. “When you find out something is wrong, it’s stressful. I felt guilty — like I did something wrong — and was in a negative space for a while.”

Cortney and her husband, Andrew, live in Oberlin, Ohio. Her doctors wanted to set her up with specialty care appointments in Cleveland, but Cortney made other plans. “I grew up near Akron, and my sister lives there,” Cortney said. “From my online research, Akron Children’s is where Andrew and I wanted to go. We were confident in the orthopedic and plastic surgery teams who would care for Marty.”

Cortney found Dr. Mark Adamczyk, an orthopedic surgeon and director of the Akron Children’s Clubfoot Clinic, who was recommended by a clubfoot group online. She also discovered Dr. Ananth Murthy, craniofacial surgeon and director of Akron Children’s Pediatric Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery.

After the diagnosis, Cortney joined online groups and did research. “I wanted to tell our families what was happening, including Marty’s potential treatment plan,” she recalled. “We shared his diagnosis with immediate family on Easter but waited to tell others. Our baby registry included a stipulation kindly asking for no footie pajamas and only bottles/pacifiers that were specified. We revealed the reason for that request at the baby shower, sharing Marty’s clubfoot and cleft diagnosis.”

Marty entered the world June 10, 2023. “I had gestational diabetes and had to be induced early, so I chose Andrew’s birthday — which was also his grandmother, Martha’s, birthday,” Cortney said. “Marty Joe is named after Martha and my grandmother, Josephine.”

Clubfoot care begins

At 3 days old, he had his first appointment with Dr. Adamczyk. Casting and bracing — called the Ponseti method — are the standards of treatment. Casting gently and gradually moves the foot to the correct position, while bracing keeps the foot in the right spot.

The Kurowski family makes special memories on a Disney vacation in 2024.





Marty's been on the move since he started walking at 14 months.

Dr. Adamczyk told Cortney and Andrew that clubfoot care is a sprint and then a marathon. “The sprint is the casting,” he said. “The marathon is the daily grind of bracing, but parents stick with it because they don’t want to interfere with their child’s progress.”

Marty got his first set of foot casts at 17 days old. “Kids with clubfeet often get new casts every week,” Dr. Adamczyk said. “Marty’s feet were flexible enough that he only needed two sets of casts to correct the positioning.”

In July 2023, he “graduated” from casts to special boots connected by a horizontal bar. “Marty had to wear the boots and bar for 23 hours a day,” Cortney shared. “We broke that one-hour break into two, 30-minute segments because he battled blisters. He didn’t understand what was happening. It’s so hard to put your baby through pain, even though you know it’s for his own good.”

Despite being born with clubfeet, Marty started pulling himself up at 6 months and walking at 14 months.

Marty only wears the braces at night now — and he’ll continue until his fourth birthday. He shouldn’t need additional clubfoot treatment after that. “The risk of recurrence is quite low, especially for a kid like Marty because his feet were more flexible,” Dr. Adamczyk said. “Cortney and Andrew have done so well with Marty. If you saw him running around today, you wouldn’t even know he had clubfoot.”

Cleft-repairing surgeries

While Dr. Adamczyk and team cared for Marty’s clubfeet, Dr. Murthy got to work on the cleft lip and palate. Marty had an incomplete bilateral cleft, meaning both sides of

“You’d never know Marty had a cleft lip and palate. I see other kids in the online forums, and their outcomes aren’t as good. I wish every child could have a Dr. Murthy.”

- Cortney, Marty Joe’s mother



Marty with his boots and bar, before the cleft lip and palate surgery.

the lip. The cleft palate only affected the soft palate — the back part of the roof of Marty’s mouth — and not the whole palate.

Babies often have their cleft lips repaired at 4 to 5 months and the palate at 7 to 8 months. Because Marty’s cleft palate was minor enough, Dr. Murthy could do both surgeries at the same time.

“He’s one of those rare patients where I’ve repaired the lip and palate at the same time because he didn’t need anything done for the hard palate,” Dr. Murthy explained. “We performed the surgery at 6 months, and that way, we didn’t have to put Marty to sleep twice. We got it all done in one surgery, and it went great.”

In addition to changing Marty’s appearance, the surgeries helped him feel better. “He was colicky in the early days, and we wondered if he had allergies. He also hated being in the car,” Cortney said. “But as soon as he had the cleft repairs, those issues went away.”

Cortney calls Dr. Murthy a magician. “You’d never know Marty had a cleft lip and palate,” she said. “I see other kids in the online forums, and their outcomes aren’t as good. I wish every child could have a Dr. Murthy.”

Marty Joe’s bright future

Marty visits the Craniofacial Clinic in Akron Children’s Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery Center annually. It’s a parade of providers — including plastic surgery; ear, nose and throat; audiology; feeding and nutrition; speech therapy; nursing; social work; orthodontia and genetics — to check on Marty’s progress. “Kids born with a cleft lip and palate need treatment throughout childhood and adolescence as they grow,” Dr. Murthy explained. “It’s important to monitor their development as a team because everything is connected.”

Cortney said it’s empowering to look back. “Some minutes and days are slow, but the time goes so much faster than you think,” she said. “I’m so grateful for the Akron Children’s teams we’ve worked with, and I’m so proud of Marty. He’s an amazing little boy.”

Scan the QR code to learn more about Marty Joe’s journey at Akron Children’s.





Give more “CHEESE!”

Marty Joe, age 2
*cleft lip & palate
bilateral clubfoot*

Marty Joe might not know he was born with cleft lip and palate or bilateral clubfoot. But he does know some important things: like how to howl like a wolf, melt hearts with a smile and stomp in puddles like a pro. Your donation helps us give more kids like Marty Joe the childhood they deserve.

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Vinny breathes better

by Heather Bauders

For months, 5-year-old Vinny Murphy of Twinsburg had a tough time sleeping. He slept with his mouth wide open, snored a lot and got up throughout the night. After surgery to remove his tonsils and adenoids, the whole house is quiet once again. And, most importantly, Vinny is breathing and feeling better.

Seeking medical care

“I hoped Vinny’s disrupted sleep would improve with time, but it actually got worse,” his mom, Anna Marie, said. “His pediatrician referred us to ear, nose and throat specialist Dr. Julie Wei.”

At the appointment, Dr. Wei examined Vinny. She talked to Anna Marie about his sleep patterns and labored mouth breathing – and recommended surgery to remove Vinny’s swollen tonsils and adenoids. “Dr. Wei is great; she’s forward-thinking and challenges people to think differently about health

and medicine,” Anna Marie said. “I don’t jump at health care decisions like surgery, so it’s really nice to find a doctor who is in alignment like that.”

Vinny’s big day


From the moment the Murphy family walked into the Akron Children’s Outpatient Surgery Center in Beachwood, staff made them feel comfortable. “The woman at the front desk saw me pacing in the waiting room,” Anna Marie recalled. “She told me her child recently had this surgery, and she assured me the Akron Children’s team would take good care of Vinny.”

The caring atmosphere carried over to the presurgical area. “Lauren Armstrong, the child life specialist, was absolutely phenomenal,” Anna Marie said. “She befriended Vinny and made him feel so welcome. I didn’t even know they had a role like this in a surgery unit, but everything Akron Children’s does caters to kids.”

Using medical play, Lauren familiarized Vinny with everything he would experience at the surgical center. “Kids process through play; that’s their language. I explained things in terms he could relate to while also giving him space to ask questions or express feelings,” she said. “I try to make the unfamiliar feel a little more familiar, which helps reduce anxiety for the patient and their family.”



The smiley-face stickers match the grin on Vinny’s face.



Surgery to remove tonsils and adenoids – which are small and round pieces of tissue in the back of your mouth and behind your nasal passage, respectively – can help kids breathe better and reduce infections. “It doesn’t matter to a family that I have done a procedure thousands of times,” Dr. Wei said. “The only time it matters to every family is the surgery for their child. Any health care provider can and should respect the privilege that families entrust in us to care for their children.”

A successful surgery and recovery

Dr. Wei takes time to talk to the family before and after surgery, treating every patient like they are her own child. “She answered all our questions and made sure we felt comfortable about Vinny’s at-home care after surgery,” Anna Marie recalled. “She reassured us that the surgery went well – and we should all feel good about the decision to do it.”

Vinny had some ups and downs during the first few weeks of recovery. “His pain came in cycles,” Anna Marie said. “We knew when he was approaching time for another dose of medication because he’d hold his ears.




Dr. Julie Wei treats each patient like her own child.

He didn’t sleep well during nights four through six. But once we got two weeks out from surgery, he was running around the house and seemed fine.”

Not only is Vinny sleeping better, but so are his parents and 8-year-old brother. “It’s so silent in the house at night now; we didn’t realize how loudly Vinny snored,” Anna Marie said, with a chuckle. “When we peek in on him at night, he’s breathing well with his mouth closed. He’s been waking up early, and I think it’s because he’s getting such sound sleep now.”

“ Dr. Wei is great; she’s forward-thinking and challenges people to think differently about health and medicine. ”

- Anna Marie, Vinny’s mother



Ted Stevens is ready for his close-up

For more than 30 years, Akron Children's photographer Ted Stevens' job has taken him to places most people never go — like operating rooms, riding in helicopters and even the top of a 300-foot tower crane.

by Kathy Johnson

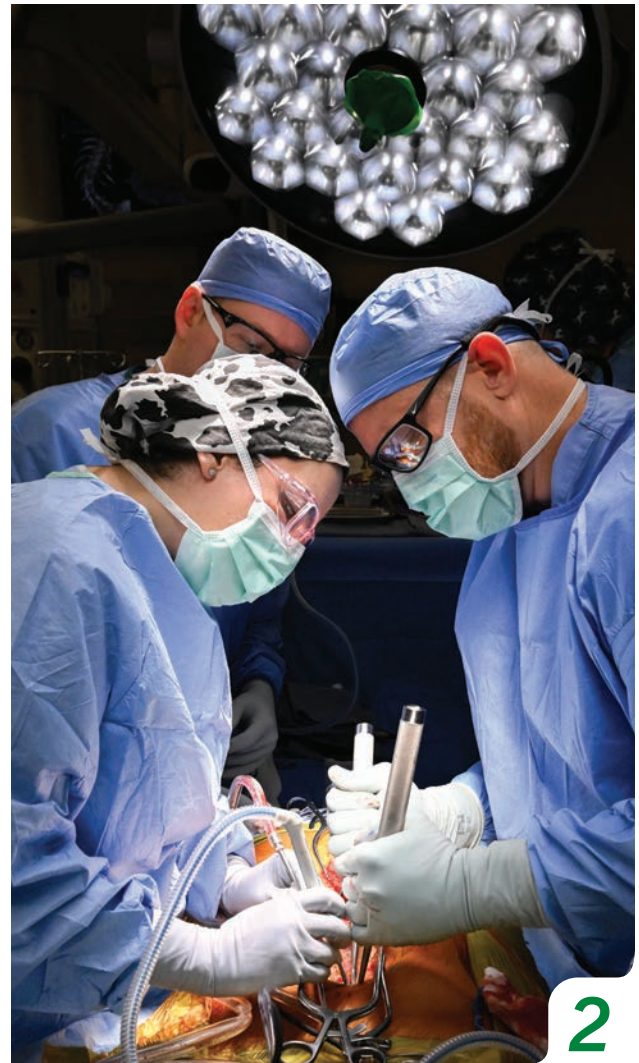




While he captures a lot of exciting moments, it's the quiet, emotional ones that mean the most to him. He's seen a heart beating inside a chest, and he's witnessed both life and loss. Some of his most meaningful work is taking bereavement photos for families who never got to take a family portrait because of their child's illness. Sometimes he's there just before a child dies, and sometimes after. This kind of work takes deep trust — something Ted earns by building real, lasting connections with families.

Akron Children's was Ted's first job after college. It's shaped his life in many ways. He met his wife here, and his kids grew up surrounded by the people and moments that make the hospital feel like home.

In this photo essay, Ted shares Akron Children's from his viewpoint — through everyday moments, big and small, that tell the story of Akron Children's and the people who make it special.



1 Some photos require patience and precision; others simply require being present. When Dereon North was just 2½ years old, she awoke from a nap unable to move. Overnight, a rare inflammatory condition called transverse myelitis left her paralyzed and wheelchair dependent. Ted has photographed Dereon numerous times throughout the years. In these images, he captures the infectious smile and resilient spirit of a young girl who refuses to let her circumstances confine her.

2 Whether he's observing complex surgeries, flying high in the Air Bear® transport helicopter or photographing campus construction projects while perched atop a crane, Ted does what it takes to get the shot. It's work that's not for the faint of heart, but it's exactly what makes Ted's images so powerful. His courage behind the lens helps capture the moments that leave lasting impressions.

3 Taking bereavement photos of Sofia Dente was very personal for Ted because Sofia's mom, Lori, is a good friend and social worker at the hospital. When Sofia was born with severe brain damage in 2011, Lori entrusted Ted to take photos that offered her a lasting way to remember her daughter. Sofia died after a 20-day stay in the neonatal intensive care unit (NICU).

4 Sometimes, it's about being in the right place at the right time — like this candid image taken during a patient's postsurgical exam. Moments like these tend to happen in the blink of an eye, and it's easy for photographers to miss them. But on this day, Ted was ready. It reminds us that some of the most meaningful images aren't posed — they're felt.



5 For 33 years, Fire Truck Day at Portage Lakes State Park has brought together burn survivors, their families and first responders for a day of connection and fun. Ted has photographed 32 of them. He manages to catch the pure joy of children, many of them former burn patients, playing in the spray of fire hoses and clouds of foam. It's a clear example of what Ted does best — capturing real emotion in spontaneous, joy-filled moments.

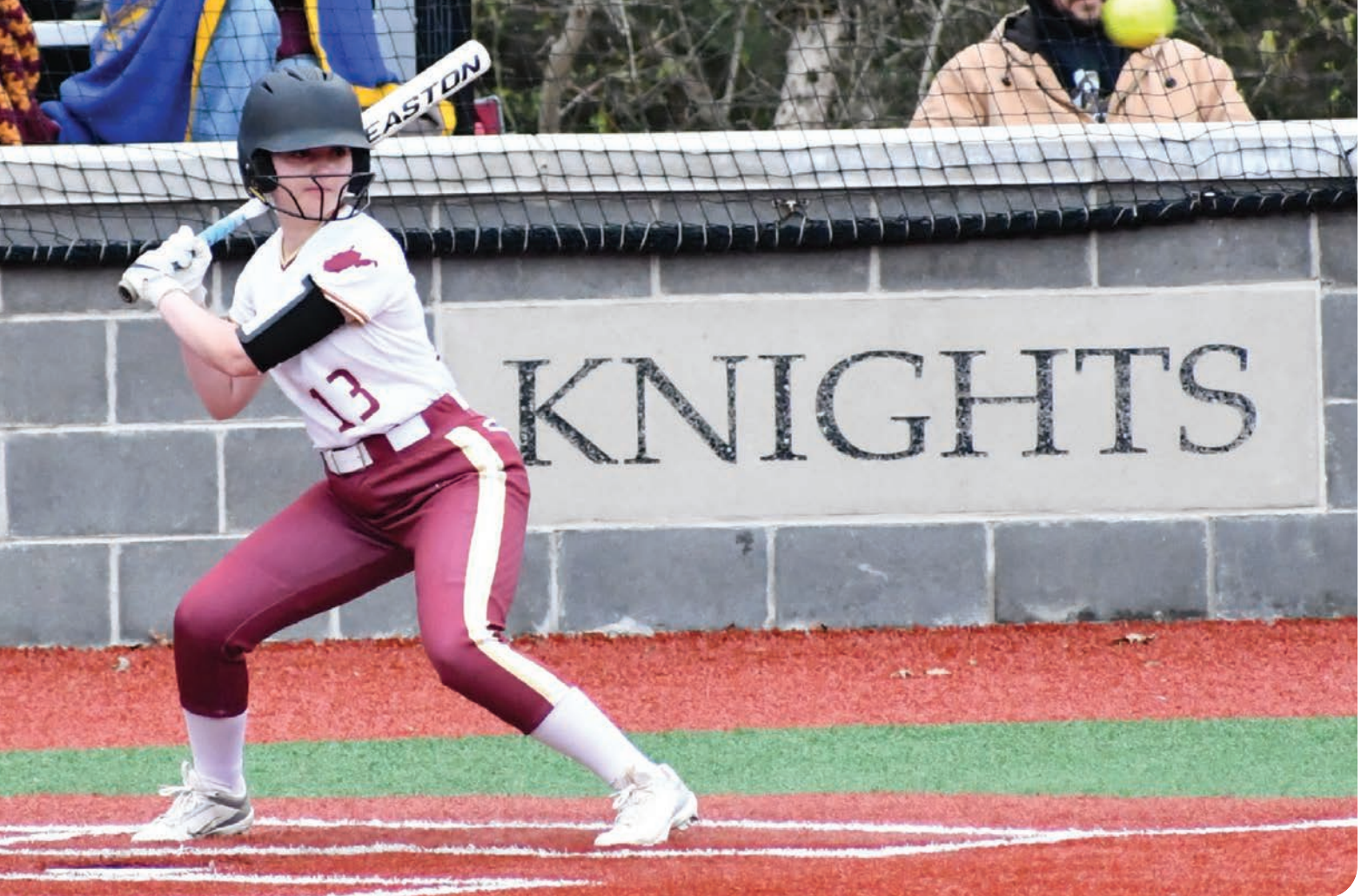


Sophia doesn't let Celiac disease stand in her way

The year 2024 didn't start out with a bang for Sophia Adkins of Williamstown, West Virginia. Age 15 at the time, she had unexpected weight loss with abdominal pain. She got sicker as the months progressed. "We thought she had a stomach virus, and she just never got better," her mom, April, recalled. "We took her to an adult-focused doctor, who said she was constipated and sent her home."

by Heather Bauders





Sophia plays softball for Williamstown High School.

April trusted her mother's intuition and kept searching for answers. She took Sophia to the Memorial Health System Emergency Room in Belpre, Ohio — which is now staffed by Akron Children's experts to care for babies, kids and teens. Sophia ended up being admitted to Akron Children's Hospital in April 2024 to find out the cause of her increased nausea, vomiting and pain.

The diagnosis

Lab and imaging tests didn't show any definitive answers, so the Akron Children's Adolescent Medicine team evaluated Sophia for a possible eating disorder. "They ran multiple tests on Sophia's blood, which showed an elevated marker that pointed to Celiac disease," April said. "The doctors decided to go ahead and do a colonoscopy and endoscopy in July 2024. Sophia didn't have an eating disorder; the tests confirmed the Celiac diagnosis."

Celiac disease is an autoimmune condition, which is when the body mistakenly attacks its immune system instead of defending it. When someone with Celiac disease eats gluten — a protein found in foods containing wheat, barley or rye — damage to the lining of the small intestine occurs. "This damage leads to malabsorption of nutrients like fats, proteins, carbohydrates, vitamins and minerals," said Breanna Williams, certified nurse practitioner from Akron Children's Gastroenterology in Marietta. "This likely contributed to the weight loss Sophia experienced."

Dietary changes lead to big improvements

After months of not feeling well, Sophia was relieved to get a diagnosis. "If you don't feel right, keep telling your parents and your doctor. The more they know about how you feel, the better you're going to get," she said. "You know your body better than anyone else. Just keep going, no matter what."

Sophia met with an Akron Children's gastrointestinal nutritionist and then started seeing Breanna regularly. "Breanna has provided great care," April said. "She explained what Celiac disease is and what Sophia would have to face for the rest of her life."

A strict, lifelong gluten-free diet is the only way to manage Celiac disease. "Most patients with Celiac disease begin to feel better within weeks to a few months after removing gluten from their diet," Breanna explained. "Sophia improved within the first few months of maintaining a strict, gluten-free diet. She took increased responsibility in managing her condition, including actively checking food labels to ensure items are gluten-free."

It took Sophia a while to get used to the gluten-free diet. "I already ate fresh fruits and vegetables, so I didn't have to make any adjustments there. But it was weird at first because the gluten-free foods like bread weren't as good," she recalled. "We kept trying different

things until we found stuff that tasted OK. I like to bake, so it's been fun to experiment with making gluten-free desserts and cheese crackers."

Turning the corner, thanks to close-to-home pediatric experts

April is grateful her daughter regained weight, feels better and enjoys life like a 16-year-old should. "Sophia is now a sophomore at Williamstown High School. She plays softball and is on the school kick line/dance team," April said. "Celiac disease has not kept her from being active and participating in extracurricular activities."

April is also thankful to Akron Children's for bringing pediatric primary and specialty care to southern Ohio. "For us, it's a two-hour drive each way to Akron," she explained. "Now, we see Dr. Tina Smith at the Akron Children's Pediatrics office in Marietta — plus our appointments with Breanna at the Marietta specialty

office. Having these resources 10 minutes away gives us peace of mind and saves hours of travel time."

Not only is Akron Children's convenient, but the staff members are caring. "I'm pleased with every doctor and every nurse we've encountered who is associated with Akron Children's," April said. "Breanna is very caring and nurturing; she's just wonderful. For anyone in our area with a child who is having issues, we tell them to go to Akron Children's. They're going to help you."



Sophia's back to being an active, healthy teenage with help from Nurse Practitioner Breanna Williams.

Health system happenings

Here's a look at what's new around Akron Children's.



Allison Lantz, nurse practitioner at the Warren School-Based Health Center, provides high-quality care for students like Skyy Davis.

Akron Children's Pediatrics network continues to grow

It's been a busy year for the Akron Children's Pediatrics primary care network.

In June, the Warren Downtown office moved into a new space at Warren G. Harding High School. The new practice name is Akron Children's Pediatrics at Warren G. Harding High School. In addition to primary care, Akron Children's offers School Health services, virtual visits and athletic training on the school campus.

Pediatrics of Akron (POA) joined Akron Children's in September, merging the two POA offices into a new building at 1625 Portage Trail in Cuyahoga Falls. The new practice name is Akron Children's Pediatrics, Cuyahoga Falls.

Additionally, a new Akron Children's office is now open in Jackson Township in Stark County.

New Food Farmacy opens in Boardman

Earlier this year, Akron Children opened a new Food Farmacy on the Boardman campus. It helps families who don't have enough food by letting them shop for healthy groceries like they're at a store.

If a family says they need food during a medical visit and they meet certain income rules, they can get a prescription to visit the Food Farmacy. The program helps patients with chronic health conditions such as asthma, diabetes, food allergies and cerebral palsy. Since opening, 1,697 individuals have received much-needed food at the Boardman Food Farmacy.

The Akron campus also has a Food Farmacy, which opened in 2023.

Deanne Johnson from The Business Journal discusses the Food Farmacy with Akron Children's Government Relations Manager Michael Wellendorf and President and CEO Chris Gessner.



Virtual nursing expands

After a pilot program in one hospital unit, Akron Children's added virtual nursing to four more units on the Akron campus. "It's clear from the results of the pilot that the addition of a virtual nurse to our care delivery team offers significant benefits to both bedside staff and patient families," said Chief Nursing Officer Chris Young. "We saw improvements in patient safety, patient and family experience, and nurse and provider satisfaction. We're excited to continue building on that success."



Pam Cassidy, registered nurse, delivers care through the virtual nursing system.

Kids stop by the Akron Children's table for stuffed animal "well visits" at the Cleveland Museum of Art Family Play Day.

A TV and camera in the patient's room let a virtual nurse in another location talk with the patient, family and other hospital staff. The system doesn't record photos, video or audio.

The virtual nurse helps with admissions, patient safety, managing medicines and homegoing instructions — so the bedside nurse has more time for hands-on patient care. The two nurses work as a team to provide the best possible care for patients and their families.

Partnering with the Cleveland Museum of Art

Recognizing the importance of being exposed to the arts during the first five years of life, Akron Children's is partnering with the Cleveland Museum of Art by engaging with the museum's visitors at various exhibitions and events.

Be sure to visit Akron Children's booth during the museum's Family Play Days and the Martin Luther King Jr. Day celebration on Jan. 19, 2026 — and look for the StudioGo mobile art van at Akron Children's events. Earlier this year, Akron Children's sponsored the Takashi Murakami exhibition, *Stepping on the Tail of a Rainbow*.



Akron Children's celebrates 135 years

Akron Children's started in 1890 as the Akron Day Nursery, where kids stayed while their moms worked. "From those humble beginnings 135 year ago, Akron Children's has grown to two hospital campuses, eight regional health centers, and more than 50 primary and specialty care offices," said Akron Children's President and CEO Chris Gessner. "Now, we're northeast Ohio's only pediatric-focused health system with more than 1.5 million patient encounters a year."

Let's take a look back at Akron Children's historical highlights.



On. Oct. 20, 1890, two groups of women that are now known as the Akron Children's Hospital Women's Board established a day nursery for children of working women.

The early years

In the early 1900s, the day nursery collaborated with Akron City Hospital to help sick kids and add hospital rooms. The facility name changed to the Mary Day Nursery and Children's Hospital. In 1917, the hospital needed more space and separated from the nursery.

Three years later, the hospital hired its first teacher to help patients keep up with their schoolwork during hospitalization. In addition to the commitment to educating patients, Children's Hospital launched the first residency program for pediatric specialists in Akron in 1927.

Specialized services

From tots to teens, Akron Children's has expanded services to care for kids of all ages. In 1970, Children's opened a neonatal intensive care unit (NICU). "Today, we collaborate with several outstanding adult hospital systems to run their NICUs and special care nurseries," Chris explained. "This allows us to expand our reach in providing specialized care for newborns who need it most."

The Akron Children's NICU team provides the highest level of care for sick and premature babies.



Ohio had a severe polio outbreak in the 1940s. Akron Children's became the polio care center of the state – admitting 20% of all polio patients (208) in 1944.

The 1980s were an important decade for adolescent care. Akron Children's established the division of adolescent medicine in 1980. Four years later, the pediatric sports medicine center opened in conjunction with Akron City, Barberton Citizens and St. Thomas hospitals.

Fantastic firsts

In 1956, Children's initiated its "candy striper" volunteer program for teens. This made Children's the only pediatric hospital that allowed teen volunteers to have direct patient contact.

"In 1973, Akron Children's doctors were the first to grow human skin in the lab," Chris shared. "This breakthrough revolutionized burn care for kids and adults."

A year later, Akron Children's began one of the first suture (stitches) programs in the country.

At the request of local adult hospitals in 1978, Akron Children's opened a burn center to treat all children and adult burn victims in a 17-county area. Akron Children's is one of only two pediatric hospitals in the U.S. with a burn unit that also treats adults.



The Doggie Brigade debuted in 1992 and is the second-oldest pet therapy program at a U.S. pediatric hospital.



The Air Bear® transport team cares for critically ill and injured children.

Akron Children's expanded to the skies starting in 2008, as Air Bear® became Ohio's first pediatric-dedicated medical transport helicopter.

Fundraising support

The Women's Board helped form the Akron Day Nursery in 1890 and continues to support Akron Children's. Signature fundraising events include the annual Holiday Tree Festival, Celebrate the Plate, the Charity Ball and Children's Tree of Lights. The Women's Board gift shop launched in 1956 to raise money for the hospital, an endeavor that is still going strong today.

In 1971, the Akron Children's Foundation was created to raise funds for the hospital. The Foundation team builds relationships with corporate and individual donors;

organizes special events and facilitates third-party fundraisers; and holds an annual year-end giving campaign. In 2024, the Foundation raised \$33 million to support patient care.

Building and facility expansion

"Akron Children's is not only committed to providing high-quality care – but making it highly accessible and convenient for busy families," Chris said. "One way we've done that is by establishing a network of pediatric primary care offices. We opened the first location in Fairlawn in 1995, and today, we're over 45 offices and growing."

In 2008, Children's opened a second hospital in Boardman to help families in the Mahoning Valley.

The Beachwood Outpatient Surgery Center offers pediatric dentistry, ENT, gastroenterology, orthopedic and urologic surgeries.



Since its inception in 2000, the annual KDD "Have a Heart, Do Your Part" event has raised a total of \$14.35 million in donations from community members and companies.

Since then, campus additions have included a behavioral health center and a new emergency room that increased in size from 9,600 square feet to 34,700.

In 2015, the Kay Jewelers Pavilion opened on the Akron campus. "Kay Jewelers made this beautiful building possible with a \$10 million gift the year before," Chris explained. "It's the largest donation in the hospital's history, featuring a new emergency room, outpatient surgery center and neonatal intensive care unit."

To improve access to pediatric-focused care for Greater Cleveland families, Akron Children's added services in Beachwood in 2024. The Akron Children's Health Center offers a variety of specialty services, plus primary care and greater Cleveland's only pediatric urgent care. An outpatient surgery center is located nearby, along with a primary care office in Mayfield Heights.

"From medical care to facility expansion, a lot has changed about Akron Children's in our 135-year history. But one thing that remains the same is our commitment to caring for kids," Chris said. "It's a privilege to care for each and every family who walks through our doors."

Scan the QR code to see the full Akron Children's timeline.



Eyes on the future: Meet Faruk Öрге, MD

by Kathy Johnson



Dr. Öрге, pictured here in Colombia, South America, examining local children that did not have the means to get medical care. Dr. Öрге was in Colombia to speak at the Pan American Congress of Ophthalmology in May 2025.

With nearly 30 years of experience caring for kids' eyes, Dr. Faruk Öрге is known for his work in innovation, research and teaching — but it's the everyday moments with patients that mean the most to him. He's passionate about helping children see the world more clearly and bringing the very best eye care to families in northeast Ohio. Learn more about his vision for the future of pediatric eye care at Akron Children's.

Describe your role at Akron Children's and what you hope to accomplish.

I was recently named the new director of Akron Children's Vision Center and the Dr. Boomer and Jill Burnstine Endowed Chair in Pediatric Ophthalmology. There's a tremendous need for pediatric eye care — not just in our region, but across the country and around the world. My goal is to grow our team and expand our clinical reach so we can continue providing the highest level of care, efficiently and without compromise.

Our patients will always come first. We also plan to strengthen our commitment to training the next generation of pediatric eye care professionals, advance world-class research and broaden the services we offer to families who rely on us.

What led you into this area of medicine?

My father is a pediatric eye surgeon, so I had a great example to lead me into this career. I didn't know if I wanted to be an ophthalmologist because of my father's influence, but as soon as I entered my ophthalmology rotation in medical school, it simply felt like home. The dream became a reality thanks to many other mentors who helped me along the way. I wake up every day ready to do what I love.

What impression do you hope to leave with your patients each day?

I want every patient to feel safe, heard and taken care of ... and to leave our clinics with confidence that they are getting the best possible care for them and/or their loved ones.

Where did you grow up?

I was born and raised in Turkiye (Turkey) and lived and studied in several cities. After I graduated from medical school, I moved to the U.S. as a research fellow at Indiana University and stayed on for the rest of my education.

Tell us about your family.

I'm married and have two daughters, ages 25 and 21. I also have a 13-year-old dog, and our daughter's two cats visit us often.



Dr. Faruk Örgе, director of Akron Children's Vision Center, is dedicated to advancing pediatric eye care while keeping everyday moments with patients at the heart of his work.

What do you do when you aren't working?

I like to travel, learn new things (I try to pick up something new each year), be with loved ones and stay active.

What is the best part of your day?

The hugs I get from my patients always has been the highlight.

What are your proudest achievements?

Personally, I'm proud of my daughters (that is mostly thanks to their mother and her endless support). I like to think I had some influence on them and their growth as well.

Professionally, I'm proud of the care I strive to provide every day — and of the teams I've helped build across the globe. I collaborate with experts on six continents from renowned institutions on a wide range of projects. Together, we've tackled challenging diseases, developed

new ways to share knowledge that have transformed education worldwide, uncovered answers to complex conditions and created new technologies to fight childhood blindness. These efforts continue every day, and with the support of Akron Children's, I look forward to expanding our reach even further.

What is the best piece of advice you've ever received?

Just be yourself, listen to your heart, find your passion/ what you love and follow it. But dreams can only come true with grit, hard work, consistency and perseverance.

What is your favorite thing about being a pediatric ophthalmologist?

Just close your eyes and imagine a world without your sight. Think about how much we rely on our vision in everything we do. It's a privilege to help change what could be a life "trapped in darkness" and bring clarity and light to a child's world. As pediatric ophthalmologists, we have the chance to make a difference — one child at a time.

Appointments with Dr. Örgе may be made at akronchildrens.org/appointments for the Akron campus and Boston Heights Health Center.



The new Tom and Jill Zidian Family Autism Center will improve patient care

by Heather Bauders

For patients who have autism spectrum disorders, coming to Akron Children's can be loud, bright and distracting. The NeuroDevelopmental Science Center, Developmental Behavioral Pediatrics and Autism Diagnostic Clinic teams are changing that experience — when the new Tom and Jill Zidian Family Autism Center opens in November 2025.

Designed with patient comfort in mind

The new autism center is located on the first floor of the Rebecca D. Considine Research Institute on the Akron Children's campus. "It can be stressful for our families to navigate the parking garages and the Considine Professional Building," said Allison Burke, PhD, child and adolescent psychologist and director of the Akron Children's Autism Diagnostic Clinic. "Our new facility will have convenient parking and a dedicated entrance. We wanted it to be easy for families to get to, taking some of the stress away from going to their child's appointments."

It took a team effort to design the new center — including input from clinical and facilities staff members, patient families, architects and a design consultant who runs an autism preschool program. "We won't have tons of bright lights and contrasting colors that can overwhelm our patients," Dr. Burke explained. "We'll have little alcoves in the walkways where families can sit down and take a break. Or if a child is in a group therapy session and needs to step out for some one-on-one time, we have spaces to do that."

New staff members and programming

The autism center will have room for more team members, including another psychologist and mental health therapists. "Care for mental health issues like anxiety or depression is a common need among autistic individuals," Dr. Burke said. "We have therapists within Akron Children's who have a strong interest in working with that population — not treating their autism but their mental health needs — and these therapists will be located at the new center."



The Els family – Ernie, Ben and Liezl – attend the Autism Center hard-hat tour with donors Jill and Tom Zidian and Akron Children’s President and CEO Chris Gessner.



A primary care provider will be available for kids with more complex needs who need a sick visit or vaccines. “It’s a collaborative effort between Developmental Behavioral Pediatrics and Akron Children’s pediatric primary care to develop this service at the new autism center,” said Jessica Foster, MD, director of Akron Children’s Division of Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrics. “We worked together to make behavioral health resources available at the Akron Children’s Pediatrics network of offices — and now we’re adding primary care to the autism center. It’s a truly integrated model of care, and our patients will benefit from that.”

The autism center will feature some new services, too. “We’re expanding our social skills programming,” Dr. Burke said. “Right now, we just have an adolescent group that’s been running for about three years. We will be offering a preschool version of that program, teaching 4- to 6-year-olds how to listen and follow directions; use good volume and body control; and make and keep friends.”

Improving access

Access to autism care is a growing, national problem. “As part of this autism center build, we’ve been changing our processes to make it easier for providers to refer patients,” Dr. Burke said. “We noticed duplicate referrals or providers being confused about who does what related to autism — which led to delays in receiving care.”

Developmental Behavioral Pediatrics and the Autism Diagnostic Clinic are also working with Akron Children’s Pediatrics on a pilot program called START Local — which stands for Screening and Testing for At-Risk Toddlers in Local Primary Care. “Sometimes, a pediatrician knows a patient has autism — and waiting for a diagnosis from our multidisciplinary team on the Akron campus isn’t needed,” Dr. Burke explained. “We’re training pediatricians about autism care in each Akron Children’s Pediatrics region, so we can get young kids diagnosed sooner and into the programs they need.



Designed with patient comfort in mind, the new center will feature more services in one convenient location.

“If a patient screens high risk for autism at a well check, the child would be referred to one of these specially trained Akron Children’s Pediatrics providers,” she continued. “If a child needs specialty care for autism, we would certainly provide it. But having the child’s primary care provider manage autism care when appropriate will reduce the wait times for patients who need a higher level of care.”

Autism Center receives financial support from the Zidian family

For Tom and Jill Zidian of Boardman, autism is personal. “Our daughter, Jillian, was diagnosed with autism at age 4. It was so hard to navigate the system and learn what resources were available,” Jill recalled. “Now, I want our donation to help families get the support they need, especially when their children are newly diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder.”

The Zidians’ hope their \$2 million donation to the center will make care more easily accessible for families in need. “There’s such a demand for autism care, and it’s tough when you don’t know which way to turn,”

Tom explained. “We hope the new center will allow kids to get the care they need sooner. Part of the gift is also funding an autism navigator position in Boardman, who will support families and connect them to the resources they need.”

The Zidians were on hand for a hard-hat tour of the autism center on June 17. Other special guests included professional golfer Ernie Els; his wife, Liezl;

and their 22-year-old son, Ben. The Els family also has a personal connection to autism, as Ben was diagnosed with autism at age 3 1/2.

“That hard-hat event was such a special day for the whole team who cares for patients with autism,” Dr. Burke recalled. “It was overwhelmingly emotional for Dr. Foster, Sarah Delahanty, our administrative director, and me. We’re so passionate about the new center; we’ve been planning it and dreaming about it for years. We can’t wait to see how it impacts the families who depend on us.”



Dr. Jessica Foster talks with patient Victor Lewis.



Make every moment count for kids

by Brooke Uehlein

What does a life-changing moment look like?

At Akron Children's, it could be a patient ringing the bell when they finish cancer treatment. Or a teen smiling for graduation photos after getting the mental health help they needed.

In these examples, and for the past 135 years, Akron Children's helps patients get back to being kids and shaping the future of our communities. Achieving this is no small feat.

"Akron Children's Foundation supports life-changing work," Akron Children's Chief Development Officer Michele (Shelly) Brown said. "The generosity of each donor has the power to help many children."

Every gift is important. Donations help to improve patient care, add new services, offer more training for providers, buy new equipment and expand research.

Like many nonprofits, fundraising at Akron Children's feels personal. It is the bridge that connects the organization's mission of improving the health of children to fulfilling that promise for our patients and their families.

"At the foundation, we want to work with donors on causes they are passionate about," Shelly said. She shared the example of how, just a few years ago, a dedicated center for patients on the autism spectrum had been a dream clinicians wrote on paper.

"After a year and a half of planning and building, Akron Children's is excited to open the Tom and Jill Zidian Family Autism Center in November," she said. "The Zidians are passionate about autism care. They gave \$2 million to the autism center project — and many others gave, too. Thanks to their generosity, this autism center dream is coming true."

The foundation team raises money to help Akron Children's stay strong. Through Our Campaign for More Childhood, donors can choose to give to five key areas that help patients and families the most:

- Behavioral health
- Kids' community health
- Nursing excellence
- Patient and family engagement
- Pediatric subspecialties

Supporters can make a one-time gift, donate regularly, join or host a fundraising event, give through



their will or trust, or volunteer their time.

"There's a saying: 'It takes a village.' Well, thousands of donors from a variety of sources make up our village," Shelly shared. "One healthy child makes a difference — not just to their family but to the community we all share."



Shelly Brown, MAOL, CFRE, serves as the chief development officer and executive director of the Akron Children's Foundation.

The lucky few

Every family is unique, and so are their health care experiences. In “The parent’s perspective,” you’ll learn about amazing patients from the people who know them best.

by Kathryn Finley, mother of Harlow

We learned Harlow had Down syndrome when I was nearing my third trimester of pregnancy. Multiple tests had left my husband and me exhausted from fear and worry, and my response was not calm or graceful.

I grieved. Hard.

“Over the past five years, the love she has taught my husband and me has been transformative. I wouldn’t change a single thing about her — especially her diagnosis.”

- Kathryn, mother of Harlow

One night, I lay in bed with endless tears streaming down my blotchy, snot-covered face. This wasn’t how I envisioned our life with our child. I didn’t want to spend my days sitting in doctor’s offices and going to therapies. I felt deep pain and grief, and a healthy dose of shame for feeling that way.

But not anymore. While I grieved what I thought I would lose with Harlow’s diagnosis, I never could have imagined the beauty my life would gain because of it. Over the past five years, the love she has taught my husband and me has been transformative. I wouldn’t change a single thing about her — especially her diagnosis.

In the months after she was born, we worked hard to make it through each feed, sleep and blood test to check her bilirubin levels, all without being admitted for every respiratory illness. I often wondered what her future would look like. Would she ever tell me she loves me or about her school day? Would she ever live on her own or hold a job?

But over time, as we found a groove, I realized that no matter what her future holds, we are here for it.

Now, Harlow is 5 years old. Our days boast the full spectrum of family life — celebrations, frustrations, appointments, community and joy. Harlow’s life is full of the things she loves: indoor track, swim lessons, summer camp. In turn, she fills ours with love, from making sure we have water and our phones to checking that the blankets cover our feet. She is beautiful, kind, charismatic and loved by everyone who knows her.

She’s reached incredible milestones, like going to school without Pull-Ups®, something I know many parents of kids with Down syndrome struggle with. Her energetic personality has earned her the loving nickname of “Stitch” from her sister — for the wild messes she leaves in her wake — something I never realized I would appreciate when I learned about her diagnosis.

I believe that there are always opportunities for our circumstances to be used for good. As a physical therapist in Akron Children’s NICU and Down Syndrome Clinic, I have the privilege to connect with other parents



Kat Finley and her daughter, Harlow, play outdoors — embracing all that life offers.

Harlow, a Down Syndrome patient, has received care from providers at Akron Children's since birth.

of children with Down syndrome. In my work, I try to bring a sense of peace, understanding and connection to these parents by letting them know that I've been there. I get it, and they're not alone.

If I could give any advice to new parents of a child with Down syndrome, it would be to love them fiercely, advocate for them and take it day by day. You are about to have tough days, but many joyful ones too. You might also feel grief, like I did, and that's OK. Because you're also going to experience gifts that not many people do, and that is why we are the lucky few.

Scan the QR code
to learn more
about Harlow.





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Schedule an appointment online right now at akronchildrens.org/appointments.

More childhood, **please.**

