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KT's Kids brings joy to disabled, home-bound children

By Lisa SchryverTribune Content Agency

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It only takes a few minutes upon meeting Katie Augustyn, co-founder of KT's Kids, to know that this is no ordinary organization, and the children it serves are no ordinary kids.

Together with Schwab Rehabilitation Hospital in the city's North Lawndale neighborhood, KT's Kids provides an experience for underprivileged, disabled children that they might not otherwise have.

It all started in 2003 when Augustyn was working as a social worker at Schwab. A 12-year-old gunshot victim came in for a follow-up counseling appointment on a freezing Chicago winter day. He had taken public transportation by himself in a wheelchair, and had fashioned a pair of makeshift mittens from socks.

"He had these soaking wet, filthy socks on his hands and he was freezing, but he had made it because he had this healthy motive to be whole," says Augustyn.

At the time, Augustyn was also bartending part-time at Liar's Club, an out-of-the-way rock club and late night hangout favored by musicians. After hearing about the child she had seen that day, co-workers Mike Cook, Herb Rosen and Mike O'Connell unanimously agreed something needed to be done and KT's Kids was formed.

"It was kind of a no-brainer, so now it's 650 kids depending on [Liar's Club], which is a really sad state of affairs because nobody should be depending on us at all," O'Connell jokes. "But we can't stop now."

Schwab treats children from infancy through age 16, all of whom are disabled. Though Augustyn's position was eliminated at Schwab due to lack of funding several years ago, KT's Kids has never stopped doing all it can for the kids who need it most.

"A lot of them are violently injured – child abuse, street violence, a lot of gunshot wounds, head injuries – because they come from the most violent neighborhoods in Chicago," explains Augustyn. "We also have kids who have disabilities through disease, like cerebral palsy or muscular dystrophy."

Toy drive on Dec. 8

Many of the children are not able to leave their homes because of the severity of their disabilities. KT's Kids works to enrich each child's life through two events during the year: a summer camp, where kids partake in fun activities like fishing and going to the museum, and the Christmas party.

Liar's Club hosts an annual toy drive benefiting children, past and present, from Schwab Rehabilitation Hospital and their siblings. This year's event will be held on Dec. 8 at 7 p.m. Guests are asked to donate \$10 at the door and bring an unwrapped gift. Donations and gifts will then be sorted and wrapped for the Christmas party at Schwab on Dec. 18.

"Many of our families have four to six kids living in their home because there are really difficult family structures and dynamics in a lot of the neighborhoods we serve," explains Augustyn. "So we'll have Grandma or Auntie with nieces and nephews and cousins. That's why we invite every child in the household."

Each child receives one practical item, such as a hat or mittens, and one toy. Additionally, every guardian receives a Target gift card so she can purchase gifts for her kids to open at home on Christmas Day.

Giving back to the community

Anyone who has ever been to Liar's Club knows what boisterous personalities reside there, and the clientele aren't much different. But underneath the slightly crass, somewhat off-putting exterior lies an incredibly generous, caring spirit.

"That's what makes it a really great thing, because a lot of the people that go to Liar's Club are kind of outsiders and punk rockers and on the fringe, so this is a great way for them to give back," adds Patric King, KT's Kids volunteer and owner of design and technology studio House of Pretty. "They can actually get connected with these kids and give something back."

In true Liar's Club form, Schwab's Christmas party is nonstop fun for kids and adults. Guests enjoy food, a dance off, face painting, and games. Last year's event served over 600 people, and it gets bigger with every passing year.

"Every year, this whole thing has functioned in a miraculous way," adds KT's Kids medical director Dr. Lisa Thornton. "Every year, new friends come around who seem to be there just for the purpose of making sure we keep doing what we're trying to do."

To view the kids' wish list or to volunteer your time at the Christmas party, visit the [KT's Kids Facebook page](#) (www.facebook.com/rockintoydrive). Donations can be made online at www.KTsKids.com, or at Liar's Club (1665 W. Fullerton, Chicago, Ill.)