



charity spotlight

By Robbyn Moore

Maggie's WIGS 4 KIDS of Michigan, Inc

A BEAUTIFUL ADVOCATE FOR KIDS

When Maggie Varney became a licensed cosmetologist over 40 years ago, she had no idea the impact she would later have on the lives of so many children. Because of her kindness, effort and care, thousands of children who experience hair loss can receive wigs and support services at no charge throughout the state of Michigan.

Maggie's inspiration and passion began when she was volunteering her time through the American Cancer Society to help adults deal with appearance-related side effects from cancer treatments. After years of teaching the class, Maggie met a young girl who attended the workshop with her mother. Thinking the young girl was

there to support her mother, Maggie soon learned it was the young girl who needed the assistance. Unfortunately, at the time, wigs were tailored in a style for adults — leaving little or no options for a child or a teen's head. Maggie invited the young girl to her salon and quickly figured out a way to provide the support she needed. With the young girl as Maggie's catalyst, she launched Maggie's Wigs 4 Kids of Michigan, Inc. (W4K).

Seventeen years later, through the kindness and generosity of others, W4K has been able to serve over 4,700 Michigan children from 49 different counties at no charge to them or their families.

A typical wig retails between \$2,500-\$3,000, costing W4K \$800 and 16 hours of labor. "Each child's story is so unique," Maggie shared. "It is an

honor and privilege to give a unique service during a time of uncertainty."

The non-profit organization provides wigs and support to children ages 3-18 who experience hair loss due to cancer, alopecia, trichotillomania, hydrocephalus, lupus, blood disorders, severe burns, dog bites, autism, down syndrome, and cerebral palsy. Each child gets a custom-made wig based on their individual head size. They also receive support service classes, social activities, field trips and counseling. Maggie explained, "Our goal is to provide a wig to every Michigan child in need. Since we opened our services in 2003 — thanks to the open hearts of the community — no child has ever been turned away and there's never been a waiting list."

Maggie devotes 90 hours a week to managing the organization — including



Eleni, one of the organization's newest children who experiences alopecia.



Emily, the organization's very first wig recipient who had cancer.



Kendall, who has trichotillomania, the compulsive urge to pull hair.

community outreach and fundraising. "I give so much of my time because that's the level of dedication and commitment it takes to run a successful non-profit group," she said. "It's all worth it to ensure every child's needs are met. I always make sure the children's needs are taken care of first."

While Maggie is the face of W4K, she points out she is not alone in her efforts. There is a team of

talented and hard-working individuals helping to support the group as well as an impressive Board of Directors, and hundreds of volunteers and businesses, schools and churches who believe in the mission.

"Our dream is to double the number of children we serve — requiring a much bigger space than our current facility," Maggie said. "We are in the midst of a capital campaign to raise funds and build a permanent brick-and-mortar wellness center where we can expand our programming."

To help with this initiative — through the donation and support from the DG Foundation and Keller Williams Great Lakes — W4K was given a house to restore and sell for seed money for their capital campaign. "The house was boarded and needed a lot of work," she said, "But we put \$20,000 into it and sold it for \$60,000 — giving us a solid base to launch our campaign."

Adding to that, W4K was awarded a \$122,000 grant from the women's group, Impact 100 Metro Detroit. "The grant money helped us purchase property to build a facility where the children will always have a place to come and heal from the side effect of hair loss," Maggie shared. "To me, that was our most successful effort on behalf of the program — validating the work we do, the difference we make throughout the state and allowing us to continue our mission." The new wellness center will offer further program expansion and increase the capacity of children served.

W4K receives calls from around the world, seeking to replicate the program. Maggie explained, "Children experiencing hair loss is not a local or national issue — it's universal." The group receives hair donations from 62 countries around the globe. "There's nothing else like this organization

anywhere in the world. We're unique and address the appearance-related, emotional, social and psychological issues children have as they journey through their health challenge."

For Maggie, working with the kids is the most fulfilling part of what she does — seeing the positive impact is the most rewarding. "I watch these children grow up and see how it affects them when they are going through health challenges, and then later in life — after they've healed — seeing them become more sensitive to others, mentoring to others in the program, and even volunteering and fundraising," she said. Unfortunately, Maggie sees about 25% of the kids lose their battle to their illness. With a somber tone, Maggie shared, "It's the most challenging part of what I do — each child is special and leaves an imprint on my heart."

Maggie finds a good life-work balance with the support of her husband, Bobby — a REALTOR® at Keller Williams Great Lakes — who helps her in the community and serves on the advisory board. Also serving on the advisory board is Carol Lukity, Real Living Realty and Karla Orlando, Business Development Officer, Senior Vice President at Huntington Bank.

To find out how to get involved or for more information, please visit www.wigs4kids.org or call 586-772-6656.

