

Lighting Up Children's Lives

by Kelly Underell

In a child's world, make-believe is paramount and getting math homework done in time to watch cartoons might be the main concern of the day. At least, that is how it should be. In a sick child's world, the license of being carefree is taken away. Fighting an illness takes precedence over everything and time to watch cartoons or do homework is replaced with waiting rooms and hospital treatments.

The Starlight Children's Foundation is a non-profit organization dedicated to helping seriously ill children and their families cope with their pain, isolation and emotional and social distress through a variety of educational programs, "distractive" entertainment and family activities. The goal is to help all children who face life-altering circumstances because of an illness have the opportunities to just "be a kid" and create positive childhood memories. Currently, Starlight serves more than 3,000 children and families per month throughout Colorado, with 80 percent of their programs in the Denver metro area. Their hospital programs serve all Denver area hospitals with a pediatric care unit. Although Starlight is not income restricted, 79 percent of Starlight families fall below \$50,000 in annual income.

By providing programs such as the Kids Activity Network, a featured program that provides entertainment opportunities that range from suites at the Pepsi Center to see the circus to zoo tickets, Starlight gives families a chance to mix in some fun between doctor visits and it brings childhood back into the equation. The programs have been proven to reduce the need for medication and alleviate the stress, loneliness, isolation and boredom that accompany a hospital stay. Starlight provides a sense of normalcy for a family who is overwhelmed with circumstances beyond their control.



In February of this year, Debbie Jessup, former Colorado banking executive and former Denver Metro Chamber board member, joined Starlight Children's Foundation-Colorado as its new executive director. After more than 20 years in the private sector, she wanted to give back to the community with a stronger commitment and involvement; however, she will not forget all she learned through the private-sector world.

"First and foremost, the skills you learn in the for-profit world are transferrable to the non-profit arena. No matter how much you care and are passionate about your mission, at the end of the day, you have to meet the financial bottom line" said Jessup.

As the metro Denver community is well aware, the current economic climate has impacted all non-profit organizations. To assure Starlight's programs are not affected with the downturn of the economy, Starlight has downsized its staff, reduced staff hours, limited supply costs and eliminated any pay increases.

"Starlight strives for a larger presence in the Denver community and throughout Colorado," says Kiki Peirce, Development Director of Starlight Children's Foundation-Colorado. "We have no agenda other than helping sick kids. We hope that the Denver community and all of Colorado will join us in making life better for seriously ill children and their families."

For more information on the Starlight Children's Foundation-Colorado please visit www.starlight-colorado.org.

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