

miracles & **memories**

Winter 2021



Give Kids
The World
Village



A Tale of Two Wish Families

Magic really does happen at the Village every day. Just ask Kristine Barann and Jim Fleszar, whose remarkable love story was written in the stars.

In December 1996, Kristine and her husband noticed a drastic change in their two-and-a-half-year-old son, Alex's behavior. He had become very lethargic, and complained that there were "froggies in his nose." Following weeks of testing, doctors discovered a tumor growing in Alex's sinus cavity, leading to a diagnosis of non-Hodgkin's lymphoma.

Alex underwent extensive treatment at Children's Hospital of Michigan, and after nine months of hospital stays, sleepless nights and non-stop care, the family enjoyed an unforgettable trip to Give Kids The World in September 1997 with the support of The Rainbow Connection.

"Alex and his siblings had the time of their lives, and meeting Henri Landwirth during our stay was very inspiring. Another highlight was seeing Alex's star join the ceiling in the Castle of Miracles," says Kristine. Back home in Michigan, Alex's care continued. Despite losing the vision in his right eye due to the pressure of the tumor in his sinus cavity, Alex's cancer went into remission, and he has been cancer-free since 1998.

Fast forward 20 years, and Kristine, divorced after 23 years of marriage, connected online with a man named Jim who shared a passion for travel and a fierce love of family. Jim had lost his wife of 32 years to cancer in 2016, and with his children now grown and in relationships with their respective life partners, he decided to date again. Kristine and Jim's first date was spent talking about their children, all very close in age... and the similarities between the two families were uncanny. Like Alex, Jim's oldest daughter, Christie, had battled pediatric cancer; both had stayed on the same floor at Children's Hospital of Michigan around the same time; and both families had visited Give Kids The World through The Rainbow Connection.

"All of these crazy things that happen throughout our lives may not make sense to us, but God has a vision for us. We just have to have faith."

"I was overwhelmed with awe at the incredible faith that Jim continues to have," says Kristine. "To have lost a daughter and a wife and still have such an extraordinary outlook on life...he is an amazing example of strength and love. It was pure serendipity that we met."

Christie's health journey began in March 1997. As Christie prepared for her second grade play, Jim and his wife noticed a bump on her cheek. First thought to be a clogged saliva gland, it was later diagnosed as rhabdomyosarcoma by Children's Hospital of Michigan. The tumor growth was aggressive, and the prescribed treatments did little to halt its advancement. In September, however, the tumor growth slowed, enabling the family to enjoy a memorable visit to Give Kids The World. "Christie, her brother, Marty, and sister, Holly all enjoyed their incredible visit to the Village," says Jim. "In addition to exploring the Castle of Miracles, they had a ball at the fishing pond, time on the carousel and especially swinging from the rope in the Wacky Water Works. This trip was very special to us, because it was the last time that our family of five was able to vacation together."

Near the end of the week, Christie's condition worsened, and upon returning home, she entered hospice. Christie passed away on December 28, 1997. "Christie may have only been on this earth for eight short years, but her awesome life continues to touch us all," says Jim.

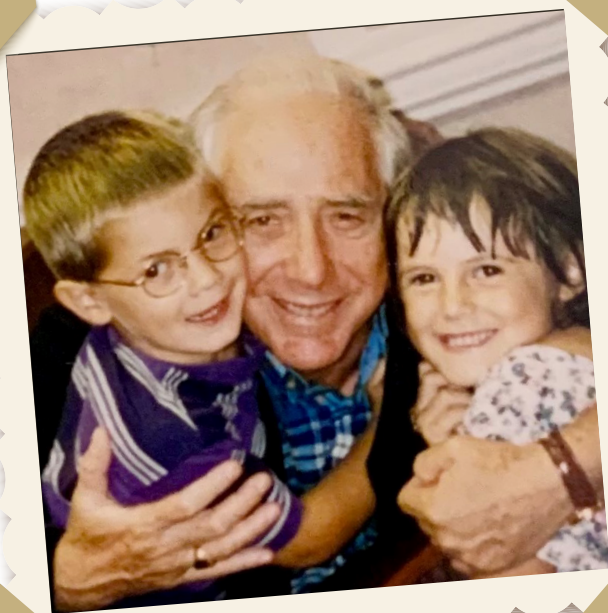
Kristine and Jim's relationship blossomed, and their "Brady Bunch" became official in April 2019 when they were married. With Alex having recently gotten married, Kristine and Jim decided to plan a family vacation to Florida and a visit to Give Kids The World during the holidays. Upon reaching out to the Village to schedule their Welcome Back Family visit, Kristine and Jim were floored to discover that not only had both families stayed at the Village during the very same week in September 1997, the families had stayed side by side in adjoining villas! From



among 166 residential wish family villas at the resort, the Fleszar family stayed in villa 115, and the Baranns in villa 116. In addition, Alex's and Christie's gold stars – which are placed on the ceiling of the Village's Castle of Miracles in honor of every wish child who has visited – are located just five stars apart from among 176,000 stars. Kristine and Jim are convinced that their meeting was no mere coincidence.

Jim sums it up with an analogy to working on cross stitch or needlepoint. "When you are working on the stitches and you look at the back, it's a mess. The threads are all over the place, and nothing seems to have a rhyme or reason. It's only when you look on the other side that you see the intended scene," he says. "That is God's plan for us. All of these crazy things that happen throughout our lives may not make sense to us, but it's God's vision on the other side that is beautiful. We just have to have faith."

Kristine and Jim's love story will come full circle on December 20 when they visit the Village for the first time in 24 years to view Christie's and Alex's stars, revisit their original villas, and create new memories in The Place Where Happiness Inspires Hope – and love.





Majic Moments and *Fairytale Dreams*

For as long as Michael Stratton can remember, Give Kids The World Village has been part of his life. A native of Orlando, Michael's childhood was spent scooping ice cream, serving food in the Gingerbread House and helping out at fundraising events alongside his mother – former Give Kids The World Board Member and long-time Walt Disney World and Universal Orlando Resort executive Jan Stratton.

“My mom’s heart always belonged to Give Kids The World; she had an undeniable passion for children, especially those who were underprivileged or critically ill,” says Michael. “She often said that children are magical, because they see the world how it should be – a world where it’s not only possible, but probable that there are fairies around the corner waiting to take you on an adventure. She told me that children are little magicians reminding us to never lose the magic in life. But to me, watching my mom live and how deeply she could love and feel things was the real magic.”

Sadly, Jan passed away suddenly in 2010. To honor her legacy of giving back to the Village, Give Kids The World dedicated the window in front of the Castle of Miracles to her by putting the letter “J” in the window with wings that read, Forever In Our Hearts.

“It was depression that ultimately took her,” says Michael. “That was the reason why I started Majically News (www.majically.com); I needed a platform that shares nothing but hope, happiness and positivity. I never wanted another person to feel unhelpful or unhappy again.”

Each month, millions of people are inspired and uplifted by Majically News’ stories of hope, happiness and humanity, with a mission of improving mental health and putting an end to human suffering. Most recently, Majically News created Majic Messengers to tell the stories of wish families staying at Give Kids The World.

“They are the stories that inspired me during my childhood and stole my heart,” says Michael. “Growing up around Give Kids The World and witnessing its mission come to life before my eyes was incredibly impactful. These families are facing the unthinkable, and yet you’d never know it; all you see at the Village is smiles and all you hear is laughter. The goal of Majic Messengers is to give these families a voice...a way for them to be recognized and appreciated for all the sleepless nights, heartache, anxiety, and uncertainty of an unknown future. It’s truly remarkable to see these kids and their families find happiness despite what would seem like an impossible task. There are no guarantees in life; we might as well leave our worries behind and live beautifully in the moment.”

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are little magicians reminding us to
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Jersey Jaxson

In 2015, one-year-old Jaxson Butkus from Williamstown, NJ, was diagnosed with ATRT, a rare, fast-growing cancerous brain tumor. He endured brain surgery, extensive chemotherapy and focal radiation. By August 2019, Jaxson appeared to be doing well, and looked forward to starting kindergarten. A few months later, however, the tumor returned, leading to surgery, high-dose chemo, radiation and three rounds of stem cell transplant. In October 2020, Jaxson stopped walking; the tumor had spread to his spinal cord. Due to swelling caused by the radiation, chemo was no longer possible.

In February 2021, Jaxson and his family were welcomed to Give Kids The World Village on a rush wish with the support of the Elle Foundation. Despite a mid-stay blood transfusion, Jaxson's spirits remained high, laughing and playing with his adoring brothers. By week's end, Jaxson was hospitalized for the last time. He passed away on February 28 surrounded by his large extended family, who traveled from across the U.S. to spend Jaxson's final hours with him.

In June, the family gathered at Give Kids The World once again to celebrate Jaxson's life and rename the Village's LEGOLAND play space *Jersey Jaxson's Playroom* in Jaxson's memory.



Unicorn Wishes

Cambri Dorko visited Give Kids The World Village in January 2013 at the age of six, one year into her decade-long battle with stage 4 neuroblastoma. Her health journey took Cambri and her mom, Shannon, from their hometown of Vicksburg, Michigan, to hospitals nationwide, where Cambri endured an endless series of chemotherapy, radiation, surgery and other treatments. Through it all, Cambri's infectious smile and loving spirit touched the hearts of everyone she met. In April 2021, hundreds of friends, family and community members gathered for a welcome home parade in Vicksburg following Cambri's final radiation treatment in North Carolina, when it was determined that her cancer was terminal.

In early May, as part of Cambri's final wish, she and Shannon returned to Give Kids The World to scoop ice cream, snuggle with a unicorn horse and relive many of the magical moments that had been so meaningful during her original wish trip. Sadly, on May 8, Cambri passed away in her mother's arms at her grandfather's home. In July, family members attended the grand opening of the Serendipity themed pirate ship entertainment stage at the Village, when a special unicorn figurehead on the bow of the ship was named in Cambri's memory.



Village News

COMING TOGETHER TO CREATE HAPPINESS AND HOPE

Give Kids The World is made possible by the support of countless generous donors, corporate sponsors and volunteers.



NIGHT OF A MILLION LIGHTS RETURNS

Give Kids The World's second annual Night of a Million Lights spectacular is in full swing, offering the public a rare glimpse inside our whimsical nonprofit resort while celebrating the holidays and raising funds for wishes. Named by USA TODAY the "Number One Thing To Do In Orlando in December" for 2020, this year's event features an array of enhancements, including a dancing lights show; tram tours of dozens of decorated villas; a dazzling tree trail; a holiday marketplace featuring Santa's Summer Home; and more. The event runs through January 2, 2022.

LAND HO! SERENDIPITY ARRIVES

Give Kids The World Village recently became even more magical with the addition of our new Serendipity themed pirate ship stage at the Park of Dreams pool. The ADA accessible ship serves as a stunning backdrop to our weekly Once Upon A Village party. The ship was christened during a grand opening celebration complete with pirates and mermaids that also included the dedication of Wacky Jack's Splash Pad. The project was made possible by a grant from the Don and Lorraine Freeberg Foundation.



OVER THE EDGE

In honor of all of the courageous wish kids who face their fears every single day, WWE NXT Champion Tommaso Ciampa and other celebrities will be mustering their courage to rappel down the side of the 32-story Hyatt Regency Orlando on February 18 as part of Over The Edge – our most extreme fundraiser ever. To participate in this pulse-pounding event or make a donation, visit www.gktw.org/overtheedge.

THE GIFT OF TIME

In 2006, Erin Cook's two-year-old son, Drew, fell in love with a whimsical clock he spotted in a neighbor's garage during a garage sale. The clock wasn't for sale, but the owner decided to gift it to him. He explained that the clock had been created by a Disney model maker named Art Millican. Fast forward 15 years to this past August, when Erin visited the Village for the first time. While on a tour of the Castle of Miracles, she stopped in her tracks when she saw Father Time, the large talking grandfather's clock that has stood in the Castle since 1994. Drew's clock, it turns out, was the original model Art had created for the design of Father Time! Erin and Drew returned to the Castle to donate the clock to the Village.



PRICELESS MOMENTS

Reid celebrated the end of his three-year journey with leukemia treatment by visiting Give Kids The World with his family in September. "This trip was just what he needed," says Reid's mom, Cathy. "To watch him play and be free to be a kid was priceless. GKTW has been a blessing to our family and will forever be in our hearts. His smile says it all! Thank you to the greatest place on earth from the entire McCloskey family!"



BLACK & WHITE GALA WITH A BROADWAY TWIST

Give Kids The World's Black & White Gala was held at the Village for the first time ever in September, giving guests the chance to immerse themselves in the magic and enchantment of our whimsical nonprofit resort. During an elegant evening under the stars, guests enjoyed delicious dining, breathtaking décor, fun-filled activities, and entertainment by some of Broadway's brightest stars. To view photos and video from the event, visit www.gktw.org/gala.



JURASSIC JUNCTION DEBUTS

A team of the world's most renowned themed entertainment partners led by Crafted and Updike Creative joined forces to transform JJ's Express into an immersive, Jurassic-themed train experience that takes riders on a journey through a jungle, inside prehistoric caves and past paleontological dig sites. The team of 3D designers, sculptors, engineers, audiovisual designers, experiential storytellers and production specialists donated their services to the project.

PAYING IT FORWARD

"Every little thing at the Village felt like a dream," says Jade Olsufka, who visited GKTW in 1997 at the age of seven during her treatment for a Wilms tumor – and now supports the Village as a monthly donor. "My family and I were able to escape the stress and make lifelong memories. Now that I am blessed with my own children, it is a dream of mine to take them to the Village and show them my star!" To learn more about our monthly donor program, visit www.gktw.org/donate.



MILA'S BIRTHDAY WISH

Diagnosed with terminal early infantile Krabbe disease at just six months old, Mila Lebow celebrated her fourth birthday at GKTW Village with her family in September. "The pain and sorrow my family and I felt hearing the news of her prognosis was and still is unimaginable; but we became determined to live and enjoy each day with Mila and to provide her with as much love, comfort and quality of life as we possibly could," says mom, Rachel. "Our week at the Village was a magical experience like none other. Our entire family was given so much love and attention, and Mila and her brother were able to enjoy it all – from daily scoops of ice cream and the rides to the royal treatment at the theme parks. It was a beautiful experience that we will all hold close to our hearts forever."

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Purchase with a Purpose

Lovingly designed by talented Give Kids The World wish kids, our beautiful ceramic ornaments help bring the magic and joy of the Village into your home – and make unforgettable gifts that give back. The purchase of every ornament and other merchandise in our Memory Market will help make magical wishes come true for critically ill children and their families.

To shop online, visit www.gktw.org/shop.



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