Volunteers ‘dec out’ hospital rooms of sick kids

From 49ers to Minions, nonprofit’s decorations bring comfort and smiles

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F or children hospitalized with serious illnesses, Dec My Room volunteers seem like fairy godmothers or super heroes, quickly transforming a cold, drab hospital room into a cozy, personalized space filled with a child’s favorite things.

Tiburon resident Lindsay Holt launched the San Francisco chapter of the Houston-based charity in April. Their mission is to change a frightening experience into a more comforting one for children and to put a much-needed smile on a child’s face.

Susan Plank and her daughter, Kendhills, originally founded Dec My Room in Houston in August 2007 after seeing how thrilled a young family was when they could decorate their room during hospitalization. Plank’s daughter, Danielle Cruse, was treated at Texas Children’s Hospital in Houston, at the time was a child life practicum student. Plank expressed interest in helping.

“It appealed to me because you don’t have to be a qualified doctor or have medical qualifications to help a family in a beautiful way,” Bailey says. “You’re simply doing it to change their experience and bring a little light.”

Nothing permanent is done to the rooms. Instead, rooms are decorated with big colorful comforters, fluffy pillows, stuffed animals and lots of decals. Volunteers always include a body pillow that the child or mother can use. One of the most popular items has been a basketball hoop and ball.

“I couldn’t imagine that UCSF would allow the basketball hoop in a hospital but the kids love it,” Holt says. “It helps with physical therapy, and the nurses love to come in and slam dunk and make the kids laugh.”

Minions, princesses and Bay Area sports teams are some of the most popular decorating themes.

“We get lots of requests for SpongeBob SquarePants and Minions,” says Lindsay. “I have a list in mind when I shop.”

Another patient, 11-year-old Lainey, who loves butterflies, beach scenes, Shopkins, Minions, Despicable Me and Dora the Explorer, also loved how her room was decorated.

“I hope they do it for more people. I love what they did and what they gave,” Lainey said in an email. “I feel happy and not as stressed out. I have never felt as good in the hospital till then.”

When Bailey moved to Tiburon from New York a year ago, she wanted to volunteer. Bailey immediately contacted Holt and expressed interest in helping.

“It ended up being a hit.”

At the University of California at San Francisco Benioff Children’s Hospital, Philanthropist Robert W. Bedard, M.D., Ph.D., endowed funding to launch the Dec My Room chapter a few years ago. The organization recently received a $300,000 grant from the Robert W. Bedard, M.D., Ph.D. Foundation.

“UCSF has been amazing to work with,” Holt says. “They have an incredible and dedicated staff.”

The Dec My Room service is available to pediatric patients who are age 1 and older and whose stay at the hospital is slated for three weeks or longer.

A child life specialist, parent and child fill out the request form and describe the child’s favorite hobbies, colors and other interests. The feeling is mutual.

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“The first room that Lindsay and her team decorated was for a 10-year-old boy. He was a huge San Francisco 49ers fan, and they decked out his room with team banners, decals, blankets, T-shirts, socks and a basketball hoop.”

The mother said it was such a positive experience and she was grateful that her son’s room was the first room decorated by the San Francisco chapter.

“This visit made my son so happy and forget about the difficult things going on in his life for a moment, and I am so thankful to Dec My Room,” says the mom, who asked to remain anonymous.

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Another chapter is scheduled to open in Cleveland.

Holt had heard about Dec My Room through her daughter, Danielle Cruse, who at the time was a child life practicum student at Texas Children’s Hospital in Houston, training to become a child life specialist who works with children and their families during sickness, hospitalization, treatment and disable. Cruse saw the joy the Dec My Room volunteers brought to the pediatric patients at the hospital and assisted her mother look into the organization.

“It came at a time in my life when I had the bandwidth to do it, and it sounded like a lovely opportunity to work with kids,” Holt says. “And a couple of my friends had had children hospitalized long term, so I knew what a difficult experience it was when they decided to assist their mother look into the organization.

“This is the first time that UCSF has ever done anything like this,” says Wendy Reese, director of volunteer and guest services at the University of California San Francisco Medical Center.

“We have been running the program in Cleveland for several years,” Reese says. “It ended up being a hit.”

In Cleveland, the program received the Pennsylvania Hospital’s 2015 Leisure in Lifeline Award for providing comfort and entertainment to the young patients and their families.

“Every time we pulled something out of the box he smiled,” Holt says.

The child life specialist told Lindsay and her team that the boy had been hospitalized for 70 days, and she had only seen him smile twice.

“The first time was the previous day when he had heard that Dec My Room was coming. “We all teared up,” Lindsay says. “That’s why we do this.”

Lindsay hopes to expand the organization in the Bay Area in the future. In the meantime, Dec My Room is looking for volunteers and actively trying to raise money.

Contributing writer Dominique Farrell has written for various English-language newspapers in Latin America.