

Volunteers 'dec out' hospital rooms of sick kids

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

By **DOMINIQUE FARRELL**
 dfarrell@thearknewspaper.com

For children hospitalized with serious illnesses, Dec My Room volunteers seem like fairy godmothers or superheroes, 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, Kendall, originally founded Dec My Room in Houston

get involved

To learn more about Dec My Room, visit decmyroom.org, or contact Lindsay Holt at bayarea@decmyroom.org or 415-233-1711.

in August 2007 after seeing how thrilled a young family friend was when they decked

out his hospital room with University of Texas paraphernalia. The Planks decided to continue spreading joy by decorating pediatric patients' hospital rooms. In addition to the charity's headquarters in Houston, Dec My Room has chapter affiliates in Dallas, Boston, New York City, Los Angeles and now San Francisco. 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 disability. Cruse saw the joy the Dec My Room volunteers brought to the pediatric patients at the hospital and suggested 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."

After contacting the head office in Houston, Holt, representatives from the University of California San Francisco Medical Center and Dec My Room met and decided that the charity and hospital were a good fit.

"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.

Reese approves all new programs that come through the door of the hospital. She admitted to trepidation concerning the Dec My Room program in the beginning because it was unlike any of their other volunteer programs, which were either one-day corporate opportunities or internal volunteer programs with a six-month minimum. Dec My Room was neither of those. Volunteers would come on an as-needed basis.

"Working with Lindsay has been amazing. (Dec My Room) makes such a difference for

the children. This is often the first time they've smiled in a while," Reese says. "It has been one of the highlights of my time working here."

The feeling is mutual. "UCSF has been amazing to work with," Holt says. "They have an incredible and dedicated staff."

The Dec My Room service is available to UCSF 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.

Armed with this information plus a \$300 budget, Dec My Room volunteers start shopping.

It takes two to three days from the time Dec My Room receives the room request to the time it is decorated.

Tiburon volunteer Kristen Bailey says that shopping is the fun, easy part.

"I have a list in mind when I shop," Bailey says. "I visualize the room and imagine how we can decorate it. We put as much color in the room as possible."

When Bailey moved to Tiburon from New York a year ago, she wanted to volunteer. Her friend mentioned that Holt was starting a Dec My Room chapter in San Francisco, and Bailey immediately contacted Holt and 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. "Since I don't have young children, one time at Target I asked a 5-year-old child to help me pick out the best Minion toy."

It ended up being a hit.

Because Dec My Room volunteers are interacting with children whose environment needs to be sterile, volunteers go through a rigorous certified background check and health clearances before entering the hospital.

Volunteers don't spend a lot of time with the patient and family, but the child is usually in the room when it's being decorated.

"The reaction from the kids has been terrific," Bailey says. "One girl was so excited that she helped us decorate and put decals up on the wall."

It's not only the children who are thrilled. For parents who are focused on their child's



PROVIDED BY LINDSAY HOLT

From left, Dec My Room volunteers Danielle Wheeler, Heather Janssen, Tiburon's Lindsay Holt and Gina Simons at University of California San Francisco Benioff Children's Hospital. Child life specialists help gather information on each child's likes and wishes for the volunteer shopper-decorators, who then shop for the items – with an eye toward soft, removable items, color and comfort – and decorate the rooms.

treatment, creating a comfortable space often isn't a priority. Having Dec My Room do that is a godsend.

The first room that Lindsay and her team decorated was for a 16-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 says it was such a positive experience and she was grateful that her son's 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.

Another patient, 11-year-old Lainey, who loves butterflies, beach sunsets, Shopkins, Vin Diesel and Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson, 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 felt happy and not as stressed out. I have never felt as good in the hospital till then."

Holt remembers one 10-year-old boy who was so excited that he was sitting in the hallway waiting for the volunteers to arrive.

Another time, volunteers heard a girl clapping with excitement as they arrived.

"For me it's been a gift to do something kind for someone else that's in a difficult situation," Bailey says.

Teenagers like to have a say in how their room is decorated, so volunteers will involve them in the process and ask them where they want things to go.

Lindsay recalls decorating the room of one teenage sports fan.

"Every time we pulled something out of the



PROVIDED BY LINDSAY HOLT / DEC MY ROOM

At the University of California at San Francisco Benioff Children's Hospital, volunteers from Dec My Room's new San Francisco chapter decorated the room of James, 10, with Minions and jungle animals. Dec My Room decks out the rooms of pediatric patients like James, who face long-term hospitalizations of three weeks or more; child life specialists help gather information on each child's likes and wishes for the volunteer shopper-decorators.

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.