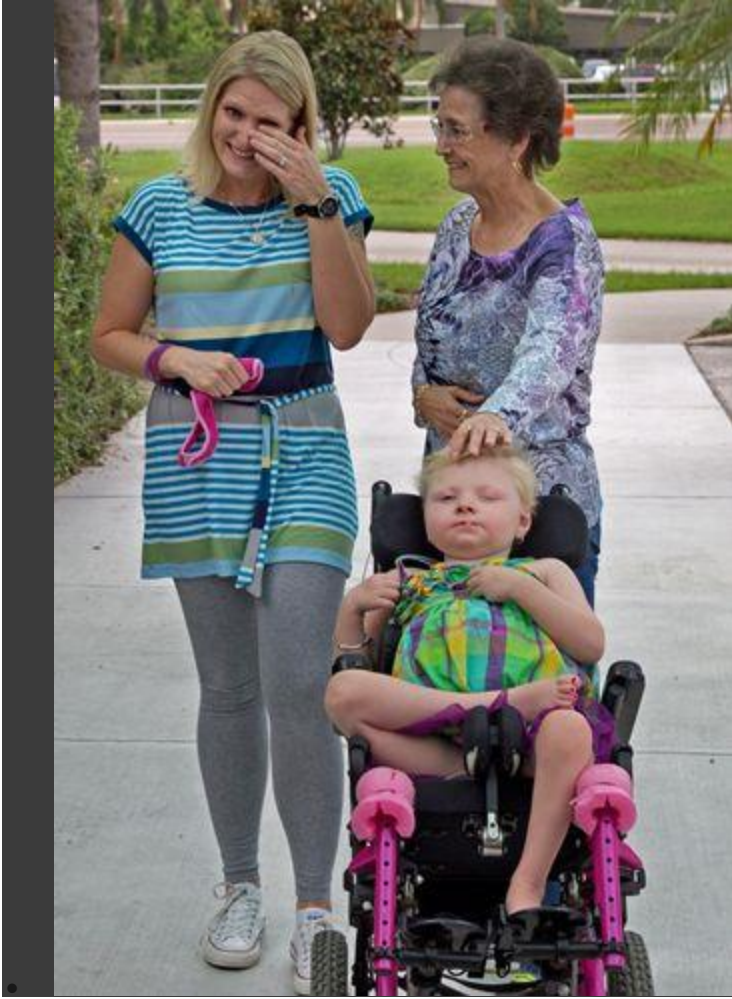


Wheelchairs 4 Kids of Tarpon Springs helps disabled kids move

By Elaine Markowitz, Times Correspondent
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TARPON SPRINGS

Madeline Robinson wants to get children moving. But considering the population of children she works with, that's a challenge. Robinson spends 60 to 70 hours a week working on behalf of disabled children, finding ways to strengthen their bodies and help them navigate their world.

Many of the children, usually ranging in age from 3 to 18, have never biked, skated or kicked a soccer ball. They suffer from illnesses such as spina bifida, cerebral palsy and muscular dystrophy, or from spinal injuries resulting from accidents. Some are handicapped by the lasting effects of physical abuse.

However their disability occurred, the children need help getting around, and Robinson works to get them on the move.

"My lofty goal is to help every child with a disability," said Robinson, 54, a Montreal native who moved to Tarpon Springs in 1979, "but realistically, I would like to help 50 children a year."

For years Robinson worked in a variety of jobs in the Tarpon Springs area, including for nonprofits that benefitted children. The disabled youngsters she encountered through that work had a powerful impact on her.

"I saw so many children in wheelchairs that were too small for them and patched up with duct tape," she said. "I wondered why no one was doing anything to help them."

With the support of her husband, Lonnie, Robinson set up an office in the bedroom of their Tarpon Springs home in 2011 and began working to help those children. Last year she gave her new nonprofit a name, Wheelchairs 4 Kids, and in December she opened in a strip center near on Alt. U.S. 19 near Klosterman Road.

Children and their families began finding their way to her through word of mouth and advocacy groups such as Children's Medical Services and United Cerebral Palsy.

"We have kids coming all the time," said Robinson's daughter, Sarah Ford, who works for her mother full time. "We got 21 referrals this past month."

Robinson raises money or gets donations for wheelchairs, adaptive bicycles used for physical therapy and gait trainers to improve walking skills for the most agile of the children. She also arranges for vehicle and home modifications, including putting in ramps and widening doorways.

Parents do not pay for the chairs or any of the other devices their children need, and it's often a challenge for Robinson to get the funds.

"Half our battle is getting people to donate money or to discount items so we can help more kids," she said.

Donations have enabled her to purchase wheelchairs and other equipment from Custom Mobility Inc. in Largo and directly from manufacturers all over the country.

Fundraising takes time and research. Ford, who handles most of the paperwork, also designed the Wheelchairs 4 Kids website for her mother and creates graphic designs for fliers.

Robinson also has received some grant money from civic organizations and family foundations, including Walmart and Julie Weintraub's Hands Across the Bay, an organization dedicated to helping other nonprofit groups improve the lives of those in need in the Tampa Bay area.

Through Weintraub, Rita Rivera, a Lakeland mom, was connected to Wheelchairs 4 Kids at a time of need. In 2010, her son Matthew, then 16, was diagnosed with a malignant, inoperable brain tumor. The former soccer player, theater performer and chorus member at Tenoroc High School in Lakeland was left unable to use his left hand and only awkwardly move his left foot.

Rounds of chemotherapy have left him exhausted, Rivera said.

"We were able to get a manual wheelchair for him from Wheelchairs 4 Kids to get around school and take part in activities," she said, but since he could use only one hand, it was hard to propel himself for any length of time. That created a problem when he enrolled in August at Southeastern University in Lakeland.

"The college has a much larger campus than the high school had," Rivera said, "and he didn't want his mom coming to push him around."

Robinson got him a motorized wheelchair to navigate the campus.

"That chair has enabled him to get around independently," Rivera said, "and has given him the feeling of being normal."

To get sufficient funds to help others like Matthew, Robinson also holds fundraising events, such as a private event called "Jail and Bail" next week that will have 21 celebrity participants, including former Tampa Mayor Dick Greco and former Tampa Bay Buccaneer Chidi Ahanotu. Each celebrity's friends and family will bail them out of "jail," with proceeds going to Wheelchairs 4 Kids.

Among those attending the Jail and Bail event will be Pattie and Rich McCartney of St. Petersburg and their 7-year-old daughter, Delaney. Delaney, said her mom, was born with "intellectual disabilities and a muscular disorder" that has left her almost completely immobile. She is learning to walk with the aid of a special walker.

"I learned about Wheelchairs 4 Kids from a family friend," Pattie McCartney said. "They installed a trailer hitch on the back of our vehicle as well as a wheelchair lift."

Those contributions, she said, have made a world of difference.

"It is so much easier to transfer Delaney's wheelchair now," she said, "and it has saved our backs."

Robinson's nonprofit also gets help from volunteers. Currently, some 18 volunteers do assorted jobs ranging from facilitating special events to working on grants or tending to administrative details.

One special volunteer, wheelchair-bound Christopher Lehman, 36, suffers from severe rheumatoid arthritis and blindness.

"Chris loves to write," said Robinson. "He comes in and uses a voice-activated computer to write stories about some of the children in the process of getting the right chair or other mobility device."

Robinson then has a permanent, personalized record of each child who benefits from her services.

Robinson sees her role as expanding beyond obtaining mobility equipment for her young charges. She now plans four outings a year for them, like a recent visit to see Winter the dolphin at the Clearwater Marine Aquarium and a trip to a Washington Nationals spring training game on Florida's east coast.

Robinson said her efforts are proving successful, in large part, because of the help of many others.

"It takes more than one person or company to get a child's needs taken care of," she said, "but there are a lot of good people out there with big hearts."

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>>Fast facts

To help

For information on Wheelchairs 4 Kids or to make a donation, call (727) 946-0963 or visit its website, wheelchairs4kids.org. Wheelchairs 4 Kids is located at 1976 S Pinellas Ave. in Tarpon Springs.

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