

## Double the Love by Ashlee Kieler

After spending 10 months in the NICU at Lurie Children's with her twins Damian and Xavier, transferring to Almost Home Kids in Naperville in particular, was a breath of fresh air for Francennett Llamas. "It makes a huge difference, not only for the children, but for the parents," she said. For months leading up to the twin's birth, Fran's doctors talked about the possibility of a NICU stay. Still, she wasn't prepared for the reality when her boys were born at 25 weeks and five days in 2021. "I didn't know what it really was or what it entailed," she said. "For me, it was, they are going to stay in the incubator a little longer, then they'll go home. When I went to see them, they had 1001 wires. They were tiny. I couldn't touch them. I wasn't expecting that at all." Damian, who was diagnosed with a short gut and holes in his intestines, and Xavier, who had a large gap in his heart, would undergo a number of surgeries during their time at Lurie Children's NICU.

"I'm a first-generation immigrant, so I've been through many things, but this was the hardest," Fran said. "The setting itself in the hospital is very challenging. Even when your children are doing well, it's still the NICU." Day after day, Fran would take her place in a chair between the rooms, "ping-ponging" between monitors in the boys' separate rooms. "I couldn't pick a side!" After 10 months in the NICU, Damian and Xavier transitioned to AHK. "The boys were looked after really well [at AHK]. It was a big relief to be in a home-like setting after the NICU." Fran noticed a difference immediately: the boys were in the same room, she could help care for them, and she was learning what life at home would be like.

**"All that equipment was given to us when we left the hospital, we had to learn all of it. So, "Ms. know-it-all" didn't "know it all." But that in-between step with AHK, it does so much, you really feel like you know what to do."**

Fran credits the knowledgeable and patient RN's for helping her and husband Salvador, learn the complex medical equipment the boys needed. "You don't see it like training, you're just there, everyday spending time with your kids," she said. "You're there with the nurses. It's not like here's step one and step two. But you go home already knowing. You don't value or see how much you picked up until you see someone [who] doesn't know it. You didn't realize you were learning that entire time you were just there spending time with your kids." It took several months for the twins to transition home—not because their parents and home weren't ready,



*Damian and Xavier ready to explore the world*



*Celebration of Damian and Xavier transitioning home from Almost Home Kids*

but because home-nursing in their rural hometown was challenging to staff. It's a national problem, and one that AHK is trying to help fix with the newly launched simulated lab training (Educate to Elevate) for home-health nurses who care for children like the twins in the community.

Nursing was finally secured for the Llamas' and the twins are now home, spending their time with family, visiting the zoo and farm, and even sharing their parents' love of horse-riding. Fran continues to think about their time at AHK and even keeps in touch with staff.

"I keep them updated with pictures of the twins," she said. "I share ideas with them. I'm so grateful for our time there. Everyone should be able to go there first before going home. The parents who came up with this idea are geniuses."

# Our Volunteers

## Volunteer of the Quarter Awards

The dictionary defines volunteerism as the policy or practice of volunteering one's time or talents for charitable, educational, or other worthwhile activities, especially in one's community.

Almost Home Kids is very fortunate to have a wonderful variety of talented volunteers that commit to a schedule to volunteer with the children several times a month, assist us with administrative tasks, contribute their hard work on volunteer projects on site or volunteer at one of our important fundraisers and sometimes—all of the above! Each and every volunteer makes a huge difference in sharing the care at AHK. We choose volunteers that go above and beyond their volunteer role and we highlight them as our Volunteer of the Quarter.

### Naperville

**Jane Flores** has been a dedicated volunteer in Naperville for 3 years and our staff love that we can count on her to come in each week to engage our kids in some fun playtime or compassionate TLC. Jane will thoughtfully bring in new batteries for the toys if she sees there is a need, and when she volunteers with the children, she treats them as she would her own grandchildren. Jane makes sure the children feel the love and joy during the two hours she spends with them. You can often hear her singing, which is very soothing for the kids. Jane's 'Grandma' touch is perfect for our children who thrive on compassionate engagement when their parents can't be onsite. We are delighted to recognize Jane as our Naperville Volunteer of the Quarter.

### How and when did you come to be involved with Almost Home Kids?

**"I started volunteering in September 2019. While driving I would see the AHK sign along Route 53 and considered getting involved. At the time I was retired but taking care of my husband who had cancer. He passed away in 2016. My mother was living with me and needed additional care so I could not commit to AHK, when my mother passed in 2019, I found myself with endless free time. That is when I told myself to get moving and submitted my application to AHK."**

### Tell us about a typical day for you as a volunteer at AHK.

**"My favorite time is in the morning. Most of the kids are awake and looking for a 'playmate'. Depending on how mobile the child is I read stories, pick up toys constantly being thrown, and running after the children that are able to walk. Regardless of the reason the children are at AHK, they are still children with lots of energy."**



*Volunteer of the Quarter Jane spending time with baby Lillian (picture taken prepandemic)*

### What is the most enjoyable and rewarding aspect of your work at AHK?

**"My favorite time is when I am holding a baby and they fall asleep in my arms. Must be the grandma syndrome. After caring for my husband and my mom AHK has given me purpose. Someone needs me and I can help."**

### Does your volunteer role give you the chance to use talents that you love sharing? Or to build new skills you're glad to have?

**"I don't know if keeping a child amused is a talent. I love singing to them, anything from pop to Broadway show tunes. Years from now, one of them is going to ask themselves why they know the lyrics to Oklahoma."**

### What keeps bringing you back as a volunteer and would you recommend AHK to friends as a good place to volunteer?

**"The children bring me back. They give me purpose. And since my own grandchildren are not close to me geographically, this is as close to a grandma gig as I can get. The nurses and aids are the best. I feel like I'm the one imposing on them while they are trying to do their jobs, yet they are always asking if I'm okay or if I need a chair or anything. I have recommended AHK to friends and will continue to do so."**

### Feel free to add anything else about your volunteer experience if you'd like...

**"Several friends have commented on what a wonderful thing I'm doing or how difficult it must be. I tell them it is joy to be with the children. I do not see the medical issues the children have, instead, I see children who want to play, have fun or cuddle. You have got to love the cuddles. While I am so happy to see them finally go home with their family, I miss them. What I get from my time at AHK is much more than I can give."**



## Chicago

**Claire Creighton** began her journey as a volunteer with us as a Freshman studying Biochemistry at Loyola University with aspirations of becoming a pediatrician and a passion for working with children in a medical setting. We were happy to welcome her to our volunteer team late 2019, but a few months later the pandemic caused our Volunteer Program to temporarily shut down. Even though she returned home to Minnesota for remote learning, Claire stayed connected to the children at AHK by sending videos of herself reading story books to the children that the nurses could then play on the iPad. Her thoughtfulness really made a big difference during a stressful time. Once we reopened the Volunteer Program Claire was back onsite volunteering and sharing her smiles with the children. For the past 3 years our kids have enjoyed the opportunity to hang with Claire and her kind ways of winning them over with tons of fun and a calming demeanor. Claire has also volunteered her time as a volunteer at our last two Share the Care Ball's which has been huge help & support. We are thrilled to recognize Claire as our Chicago Volunteer of the Quarter and can't wait to see her future accomplishments and know that AHK had a small part in her medical career.

### How and when did you come to be involved with Almost Home Kids?

“During my first year of college at Loyola in 2019, I was seeking out volunteer opportunities that I could continue with throughout my collegiate experience. I was introduced to Almost Home kids through a peer and after learning more about the mission of AHK I applied immediately! I am interested in pursuing medicine, potentially with a pediatric focus, and I have always had a love for kids. AHK is the perfect place for both of these passions of mine!”

### Tell us about a typical day for you as a volunteer at AHK.

“When I arrive at AHK, I am always greeted by a smiling staff member and the sound of music or the kiddos in their rooms. I either join one of the kids in their room, or we head to the family room for some reading and playtime. The time always flies by and often ends with a little wave or, if I'm lucky, I'm blown a kiss goodbye!”

### What is the most enjoyable and rewarding aspect of your work at AHK?

“I love seeing the smiles on the kids' faces and hearing them giggle while we read or play. It is incredibly rewarding to see the joy you can bring to a child while you interact, or the soothing role you can play as you rock an infant to sleep. It is a privilege to be a part of

their lives, even for just a few hours a week. Knowing you are a part of their journey home is so fulfilling!”

### Does your volunteer role give you the chance to use talents that you love sharing? Or to build new skills you're glad to have?

“I have been fortunate enough to employ the talents that I already had when I first joined AHK, as well as build new skills! My passion for children and my natural ability and talents to nurture and connect with children have been well used at AHK. Each child at AHK teaches me something new about myself, and I am so grateful for everything I have learned during my time volunteering at AHK. I have learned how to communicate in different ways, as well as how to adapt quickly to new situations, and I am confident these skills will translate to a variety of facets of my life.”

### What keeps bringing you back as a volunteer and would you recommend AHK to friends as a good place to volunteer?

“I love sharing my experience at AHK with friends and family, and I'm always eager to recruit more volunteers! The environment at AHK is welcoming and bright, and it is such a fulfilling experience to bring joy to the kiddos and their families. The smiling faces and giggles keep me coming back and looking forward to my time at AHK. It brings me so much joy to spend time with the children. I love that sometimes the things that make them laugh the most are not their favorite toys but are the funny noises I make while I 'fly' my hands around in the air. I would highly recommend anyone and everyone to volunteer at AHK!”



Volunteer of the Quarter Claire hanging out with Makenzie & Alex

# Our Community

## Philanthropy Made Easy

### Family – οικογένεια – familia – rodzina – teaghlaigh – pamilya

Our core value is family in all its forms and manifestations; it drives everything we do at Almost Home Kids. We believe that all children deserve to grow up in a family setting and to be part of a community. Rooted in every effort is our goal to help families remain whole and together.

Thank you to the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America & Greek Orthodox Ladies Philoptochos Society for partnering with us. Their generous grant support of \$19,200 will help us provide De-Escalation Training to our clinical team to enhance their communication skills. Participants acquire new skills and gain confidence in managing through tense situations in a family-centered, culturally sensitive way.

Participants are better able to identify common reactions to conflict, examine personal reactions to conflict, recognize and address implicit biases affecting the situation, utilize de-escalation skills when engaging in difficult conversations, create psychological safety during difficult conversations including boundary setting, and utilize negotiation techniques.

For nearly 15 years, we have received beautiful donations of handmade quilts and pillows for the children helping to make our house a home. We have also received countless personal donations from Greek parishioners throughout Chicagoland, especially from Holy Apostles in Westchester and Saints Constantine and Helen Greek Orthodox Church in Palos Hills.

Thank you for all the love and compassion that you share with us.

### Save the Date

Giving Tuesday is November 29—stay tuned for more details via e-mail.

Thank you to our Giving Tuesday sponsors—your partnership means everything to us!



### Combined Federal Campaign

Are you a federal worker? You can be the Face of Change for children with complex medical needs by giving to Almost Home Kids through the CFC workplace giving program. Retirees can participate too! Be sure to look for us during the upcoming enrollment period (Sept. 1–Jan. 15), our designation number is 79874.



Quilt donations from St. Helen Women's Philoptochos at Saints Constantine & Helen Greek Orthodox Church in Palos Hills



Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America & Greek Orthodox Ladies Philoptochos Society check presentation





## Children's Supplies Wish List: (items must be new, please)

The items on our Wish List are things we will utilize at both our sites. If it is convenient for you—we have an Amazon Baby Registry that is constantly updated with current needs for the children and/or household items. Please visit our Amazon.com and click on Baby Registry and in the Search bar type in Almost Home Kids/ Naperville. It's easy to order there and the items will be shipped directly to our Naperville site to be shared between both our Naperville & Chicago sites.

Or you can shop on your own and drop off at the Naperville site ideally Monday-Friday when we have a full staff to welcome you and accept the donations. If you have any questions reach out to Lisa Snow, Community Relations Manager at [lsnow@almosthomekids.org](mailto:lsnow@almosthomekids.org). Thank you for your kindness and generosity!

## Children's Supplies Wish List:

- Children's supplies Wish List:
- Diapers – Sizes 2, 3, 4, 5 & 6
- Unscented baby wipes
- Pacifier clips
- Johnson & Johnson baby wash & lotion
- Large bath towels
- Twin jersey knit sheets
- Crib jersey knit sheets
- Infant play gym activity mat
- Walkie-talkies for use when outdoors with the children – Amazon WokTok brand 4-Long Range Walkie Talkies Rechargeable for Adults. \$69.99 for set. Please reach out to Lisa at [lsnow@almosthomekids.org](mailto:lsnow@almosthomekids.org) for details
- Baby monitor – Amazon Vtech VM924 Remote Pan-Tilt zoom video baby monitor w/5" LCD screen \$69.95 – Need 2 of these. Please reach out to Lisa at [lsnow@almosthomekids.org](mailto:lsnow@almosthomekids.org) for details.

## House/Office Supplies Wish List:

- Forever postage stamps
- K-Cups for a 2.0 Keurig coffee maker
- Sticky Post-It Notes
- Batteries – AAA, AA & C
- iPad for children

# Our Events

## AHK 2022 Event Calendar

2022 was another great year for our events.

The always enthusiastic **AHK Young Associates Board (YAB)**, led by YAB President Mo Salem, hosted their annual **No Place Like Home** fundraiser held at the Hubbard Inn on June 3rd. After 8 years of support and adhering to our mission there is no doubt this group of young professionals are ready to meet any challenge. Almost \$30,000 was raised thanks to over 140 amazing attendees, donors and sponsors, including Plante Moran, Wintrust, CRG Real Estate and Tito's handmade vodka. If you are interested in learning more about the Young Associates Board, please reach out to YAB Secretary Caroline McLendon at carolinefhealy@gmail.com.

The **Tasting for a Cause** event raised over \$30,000. Michelle Baker and Karin Prangley led the fabulous event committee (Bregan Herrold, Jen Horsley, Carley Diedrich, Rolanda Shine, Lourdes McKillop and Sophie Worden) in hosting this year's event at Verve Wine and Provisions. This amazing venue, a dual-purpose restaurant and retail space, hosted a premium wine tasting and offered a spectacular buffet for over 125 very generous attendees. A huge thank you goes to our sponsors CIBC, Cushman & Wakefield, Swoon, Verve Wine & Provisions, Sweet Home Gelato, and Saks Fifth Avenue and big thanks to the volunteers from Swoon and to everyone who attended and enjoyed the tasting.

For the 2nd year in a row **The Leadership Group** named AHK as their beneficiary, thanks to Board Member Marty Koehler, who chaired the organizing committee for the event. Marty, alongside Co-Chair Laurie Koehler and founder of the LG, John Liacone, brought along 96 golfers who raised an astonishing

\$86,000 for AHK. Dyan McIntire shared the story of her daughter Caitlyn and their family's remarkable testimony of how AHK has impacted their lives. A huge thanks to the donors, volunteers and the amazing sponsors who joined title sponsor Marsh McLennan Agency including AArete, ADP, Assurance, CIBC, Clune Construction Company, Forvis Global Leadership Network, Huntington National Bank, M Holland, Meltzer Purtill & Stelle Law, Midwest Promotional Group, Pinion Solutions Group, PNC Bank & PNC Equipment Finance, Rooth Coaching & Consulting, RSM, Salo LLC, The Overture Group, U.S. Bank, Wells Fargo Commercial Banking, Westwood Tavern, Wintrust Commercial Banking and many more. We are thrilled to announce that they will be back in 2023 to benefit AHK for a 3rd consecutive year!

The **Golf Marathon** continued to combine fun and fundraising on Zigfield Troy's sporty par-3 course in Woodridge. Marathoners golfed 100 holes to benefit Almost Home Kids and raised almost \$10,000. Thanks to Shanahan's Restaurant for providing a well-deserved lunch, and after a great day on the course, the golfers also enjoyed a barbeque feast from Q Barbeque. We want to thank the Troy brothers and we could not have done it without the dedication and support of Dan Ault, Mike Hoffman (and team), Kris Lundren, Ryan Satterfield, Gary Karch and Patti Bellock for helping to host another successful golf marathon event.

The 2022 **"Share the Care Ball, a Glamorous Affair"** proved to be a night not to forget. The gala was held on October 28th with over \$310,000 raised to benefit the children of AHK thanks to almost 300 very generous attendees. The historic Hotel Intercontinental was the perfect backdrop for this event which brought out all the grandeur and glitz as we were transported back to the glamorous 1920's. The evening kicked off with



AHK Young Associates Board hosted their annual No Place Like Home fundraiser



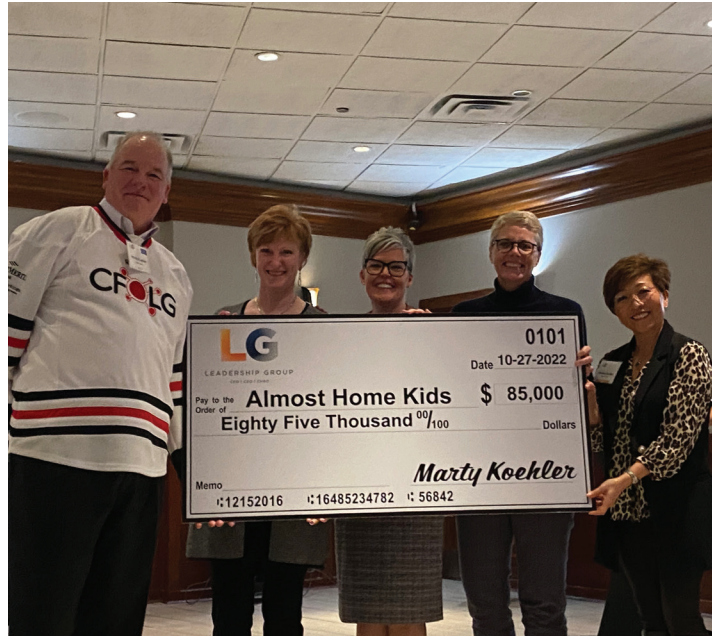
Attendees at the Tasting for a Cause event in June



a dance routine by Duet Dance Studio, which really set the mood. The ballroom was transformed into a roaring 20's theme which marked an era of Jazz, Art Deco and economic growth. Dyan McIntire gave a very heartwarming parent testimonial about the challenging journey her daughter Caity and family have been on, and how AHK has helped. We recognized the amazing and incomparable Share the Care Ball Champions Suzi Bramson Brooks and MaryBeth Smith as well as our fantastic Distinguished Donor, JMG Financial Group, represented by Yonhee Gordon, longtime AHK Board of Director. Co-Chairs Carley Diedrich and Jigna Patel did an outstanding job leading our talented committee (Suzi Bramson Brooks, Terri Danko, Jen Horsley, Franz Lacher, Ann O'Riordan, Karin Prangley, Mo Salem and MaryBeth Smith). Together they put together a terrific program, staged an impressive online auction and rallied incredible support for Almost Home Kids Chicago. It was great to have Ken Arlen and his Evolution Orchestra provide the absolute best in live entertainment. Extra special thanks to the Leo S. Guthman Fund for their generous matching gift for all paddle raises of \$1,500 and greater and all the attendees, donors and sponsors who included McKinsey & Co, CA Ventures, JMG Financial Group, Atmosphere TV, Ann & Robert H. Lurie Children's Hospital of Chicago Medical & Dental Staff Officers, Ann & Robert H. Lurie Children's Hospital of Chicago, Brown Brothers Harriman, Grant Thornton, Neuco, Pasha Orthodontics, Polsinelli, The Madhiwala Family, University Retina, Andrew Ushakov (who created the amazing graphic design for the event), Vin Chicago, Ken Arlen Evolution, Yanni Design Studio, WTSO, Duet Dance Studio, Intercontinental Hotel, and SpeedPro.

Save the date for the Spring Gala **"Arts in the Parks"** which is on April 21, 2023, at the Hyatt Lodge in Oak Brook. More details will be posted on our website about this first gala of the 2023 season.

If you are interested in learning more about any AHK event, or if you would like to organize an event or host a fundraiser to benefit Almost Home Kids, please reach out to Andrea Kerr at [ankerr@almosthomekids.org](mailto:ankerr@almosthomekids.org)—we love a party for a purpose!



The LG Golf Outing was a huge success with the final total over \$86,000!



Share the Care Ball, a Glamorous Affair's fabulous gala committee



AHK Golf Marathon with Dan Ault, Andrea Kerr and Patti Bellock

Affiliated with

 Ann & Robert H. Lurie  
Children's Hospital of Chicago

7 South 721 Route 53  
Naperville, IL 60540

*Almost Home Kids provides a bridge from hospital to home through an innovative community-based care system for children with medical complexities. We respond to the needs of families, train caregivers, offer respite care, advocate for accessibility and inclusion and educate healthcare professionals.*

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