

By Tracey C. Velt

Caroline

Lifeline for Sick Children

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J. Boyd Spencer

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For Caroline McCartney, a simple request for help blossomed into a calling. Nearly 20 years ago a friend invited the successful Norfolk, Va., real estate salesperson to channel some of her energy into raising money for St. Jude Children’s Research Hospital. Having grown up in Tennessee near the Memphis-based institution, McCartney was well acquainted with its lifesaving work and jumped at the chance.

She’s been firing on all cylinders ever since, netting millions of dollars for the battle against catastrophic pediatric diseases. “I never had any children of my own. I can’t think of a better way to give back than helping children. It felt like where I needed to be,” says McCartney, 61, executive sales vice president of GSH Real Estate Corp. in Norfolk. She has been with the company since she started her real estate career in 1978.

St. Jude, founded by the late entertainer Danny Thomas in 1962, specializes in the research and treatment of cancer and other life-threatening illnesses, helping children from around the world regardless of their families’ ability to pay. “It costs more than \$1 million a day to operate St. Jude,” says McCartney, “so every million I can help raise means the hospital can go on finding ways to help more children live.”

A volunteer since 1990, McCartney was named St. Jude Dream Home Chairperson of the Year in 2007, helping to raise nearly \$1.2 million to benefit the hospital. She coordinated the sale of 11,000 tickets and paid for newspaper ads to support the project, in which a brand-new luxury home valued at \$750,000 would be given away to a lucky ticketholder.

“The effort raised the most money at the lowest cost ratio, 22 percent, of any Dream Home we have ever done,” says J. Boyd Spencer, St. Jude’s senior philanthropic adviser. “Because Caroline was so successful in getting donations of materials and labor, we received \$900,000 in net income from this single event.”

To keep the builders motivated about the importance of their volunteerism, McCartney arranged for a \$20,000 donation to fly them to Memphis to tour the hospital and meet patients, families, doctors, and staff. “Caroline doesn’t like to hear people say ‘no,’” says Spencer. “Her favorite phrase is ‘Why don’t we say maybe, yes?’ and then she finds a way to make it happen.”

McCartney says she’s dedicated to St. Jude because it does such valuable work so well. “When Danny Thomas opened the hospital, the survival rate for children with the most common form of leukemia was 4 percent. Today it’s 80 percent,” she says. The impact of such medical

advancements become real when you meet the children who benefit.

One is Lizzie Dorschel, a 14-year-old from Norfolk, who in 2001 was diagnosed with a brain tumor. Today, she’s happy and cancer-free. “She’s tall and thin like a little string bean. Just the other day I was doing a walkthrough; she came riding up on her bike and said, ‘Miss Caroline, I didn’t know you were going to be in my neighborhood today,’” says McCartney. “She went racing home to get her mother and then we had the nicest visit.”

“We took Lizzie to top doctors all over the country and were losing hope, but after six weeks of radiation treatment at St. Jude her tumor was gone,” says Lizzie’s mother, Mary Alice. “I can’t tell you what that means to a parent, and we owe it all to St. Jude and people like Caroline who make their work possible.”

It costs more than \$580 million a year to run the hospital, with most of that coming from donations and fund-raisers like those McCartney has championed. Each year the hospital treats more than 5,000 children from across the United States and abroad.

“That’s something we simply could not do without the efforts of people like Caroline McCartney,” says St. Jude’s Spencer. “She’s what the military would call a force multiplier. Any campaign she touches has a greater chance for success because of her involvement.” ■



2008 Good Neighbor Award Winner Caroline McCartney helped raise \$1.2 million as chairperson of St. Jude’s Dream Home Giveaway. “The Dream Home was beautiful, but not as beautiful as the smiles you see from the children who have been helped by St. Jude,” says McCartney. With Vivian (left) and Lizzie, who owe their lives to the research hospital.

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