

BILL DRURY



It Meant That Much

Bill Drury has known Make-A-Wish all its life. In fact, they kind of grew up together.

“We were just kids, practically babies when we started the organization in 1980,” he says. “I was just out of law school, not yet 30.”

It is obvious that Drury is a trial lawyer. He possesses the vigor, the eloquence, the intense focus on whomever is speaking or listening that goes into making a lawyer riveting in court. The affable demeanor can flip to steely challenge in an instant; he can go from disarming to earnest to analytical without a pause. Looking over early records and papers with his sister-in-law, co-founder Kathy McMorris, one Sunday on his patio, Drury remembered the first time he heard about what wasn't even named yet.

“I dropped by Kathy's house because her husband Jim was digging a pool and I wanted to see how the project was progressing,” he says. “I was on my way to give a speech to a convention of psychologists. Kathy told me about what had been done for Chris. I distinctly remember saying, ‘an organization should be formed, because this could be one of the biggest charities in the country. This idea sells itself.’ I missed the first four meetings and then I jumped in with both feet.”

By the time incorporation papers were filed, Drury was on the team. He recalls that as an attorney, he was asked to develop some of the wish-granting policies, including drawing up the papers that referring doctors were required to sign for their patients to become wish kids. “The physicians hated to sign those documents because they thought they were signing a death certificate. They didn't want to put in writing that they thought a patient wouldn't see his or her 18th birthday. Years later, the wish-granting policies were modified to no longer require a diagnosis of terminal.”

Drury smiles when he picks up a roster of early board members. “I can tell you right now this was definitely typed on Grace

LaScala's typewriter. She did all our typing at that time – very nice lady, very dedicated.” And he laughs when he pulls out an envelope that still contains change from a contributor's donation, saying Kathy was scrupulous about keeping Make-A-Wish finances separate from her own. Seeing a drawing reminds him of Amy Myers' drawing of a wishbone, which was one of the organization's early logos. “She worked for a toy designer and loved children,” he remembers.

He remembers his office address in those days: 617 North Second Avenue. “We had a large conference room, in which we held our board meetings, including the meeting filmed by *NBC Magazine* in January 1982.” Drury and McMorris both laugh out loud when they view the *NBC Magazine* video (which was aired nationally twice in a 12-month period) commenting that the suits are dated, the faces unwrinkled – and the room was full of cigarette smoke. After that piece aired, donations and interest grew almost overnight.

Drury says after the segment ran, hundreds of organizations similar to Make-A-Wish sprang up nationwide. “I'm not complaining; it was very nice. We also received many letters and phone calls from people asking how they could form local chapters of Make-A-Wish. Looking back, I don't think *NBC Magazine* had the vaguest idea of how underfunded we were. All the attention on Make-A-Wish resembled putting too much water on a plant. We didn't know what to do with all of the requests for chapter status and for information on how people could get involved. Ironically, as a result of all of the attention and interest we were receiving, the organization almost didn't survive.”

To Drury, Make-A-Wish was at a crossroads: “We either had to remain local, or figure out how to set up a national foundation and maintain authority over the brand. As a lawyer I knew that we had to act quickly to establish a national presence.” Following a vote of the Make-A-Wish Board of Directors to form a national foundation, numerous board members resigned for personal reasons. “We were

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Left: Bill Drury on an expedition to climb Mt. Kilimanjaro in 2011 (courtesy Bill Drury)



reduced to a handful of board members and had no money to continue.”

One Saturday afternoon, which Drury recalls starkly, an impromptu meeting took place in Drury’s living room. In attendance were Kathy McMorris, Grace LaScala, Linda Kaplan, and Bill and Colleen Drury. “At that meeting we resolved to forge ahead with creating a national wish-granting organization and we each contributed \$250.

“If you want to know the truth, in my view that was when Make-A-Wish finally crystalized. We were all of one mind that we wanted the organization to grow. We brought in attorney Gil Rudolph to prepare the national paperwork; Gil also obtained our 501(c)(3) status (the IRS tax-exempt status afforded to qualified non-profits). For almost a year, we would shift in our board meetings from state to national business; you would have had a hard time finding a dividing line between the two entities.”

Drury doesn’t shrink from other difficult periods in the history of Make-A-Wish either, such as the debate over altering the language of Make-A-Wish to grant wishes to children with life-threatening illnesses instead of terminal illnesses. Or the debate over changing the name from Greicius Make-A-Wish Memorial, Inc. to the Make-A-Wish Foundation (which was shortened again in 2012, simply to Make-A-Wish). Or the loss of board members who resigned because they feared they might be personally liable if someone was hurt during the granting of a wish.

He talks about how Jack Stanford led the newly formed national board to solvency and order, bringing corporate wisdom and experience to the still-young group. “We couldn’t have done it without him. We could have fallen apart in so many ways.”

But the memories of the early years make him a little wistful. He recalls his own resignation in the late 80s as a director

of Make-A-Wish of Arizona and as a director and Executive Vice President of Make-A-Wish of America. “At that point I had four daughters and needed to focus on building my law practice.” (He was also becoming involved in a non-profit professional association of law firms that still exists today.) He looks for words to explain what the first eight years of Make-A-Wish meant to him.

“I made wonderful friends and met hundreds of good, warm, loving people – guiding lights, really. It was truly awe-inspiring to see the way the families rallied behind their wish children and the strength of the wish children themselves in the face of adversity.”

Drury talks about how positive it was for his daughters to grow up surrounded by caring people dedicated to easing the suffering of the children and their families. But he seems to feel he hasn’t quite explained the depth of the feelings about the bond between the original board members. He takes a deep breath.

“I never talk about this. But when I was 32, I was diagnosed with lymphoma. I had it for 27 years and treated it with radiation several times. Finally I underwent chemotherapy several years ago and it has been in remission ever since. I rarely talked about it, because I didn’t want people to treat me differently. But I told the board. Do you understand? We were truly a family.”

That Drury would in essence violate the confidentiality of his younger self to explain how deeply Make-A-Wish affected him illustrates how important it is to him that people understand what it meant to be part of the hungry years in Make-A-Wish history. The attorney has pulled out all the stops to make his case. There are no more questions.