

A Light at a Dark Time

An Interview with David Williams, President and Chief Executive Officer, Make-A-Wish Foundation of America



EDITORS' NOTE David Williams spent 10 years at Habitat for Humanity International, rising to Executive Vice President and Chief Operating Officer before joining the Make-A-Wish Foundation of America in January 2005. The following year, he was appointed to the Helping to Enhance the Livelihood of People (HELP) Around the Globe Commission by President Bush.



ORGANIZATION BRIEF Founded in 1980, the Make-A-Wish Foundation is the nation's largest wish-granting organization. Today, the Foundation grants the wishes of children with life-threatening medical conditions in the U.S. every 40 minutes.

How do you define the Make-A-Wish Foundation's mission?

Every year in the United States, about 27,000 children are diagnosed with a life-threatening medical condition. When that diagnosis happens, a family's life turns upside down, and instead of dealing with Little League and ballet practices, they become concerned about surgery, radiation, and chemotherapy. So the Make-A-Wish Foundation comes along and asks the child a very simple question: If you could meet anyone, if you could go anywhere, if you could do anything, if you could have anything, what would it be? The real mission is to provide hope, strength, and joy – not just to that child, but to the entire family. Last year, we granted nearly 13,500 wishes; that's a wish every 40 minutes. The vast majority of that work is done by volunteers. Donations come from all over the country. It's truly a grassroots effort. There's plenty of work for us to do, which drives us to work harder, raise money, and reach more kids.

Is it challenging to continue providing service and to raise funds in this economy?

There has definitely been an impact on fundraising, but overall we are holding our own, which is a tribute to our strong brand. People understand that just because the economy is not doing well, it doesn't mean kids are not getting sick. Fortunately, we have a loyal base of donors who continue to support the organization.

Do you have parameters for granting wishes or do you try to grant them all?

The only parameter we have is that the wish can't be illegal or overly dangerous, so we don't grant anything involving firearms, for example. Other than that, we feel we should do everything we can to grant a child's heartfelt wish.

Is there close coordination on a global basis with your overseas Make-A-Wish partners?

There's very close coordination. The Make-A-Wish Foundation International is part of the Make-A-Wish Foundation. They have a license

to carry on the foundation's work outside the United States. In fact, they've recently moved into the same building that we're in, so the collaboration is closer than ever.

How critical are corporate partnerships and sponsorships?

The corporate side is huge for us, and some of our corporate partners are the mainstay of this organization. Our largest cash donor is Macy's. The Walt Disney Company has been a top supporter because so many wishes involve going to Walt Disney World Resort and Disneyland, and they donate all the tickets. We're always bringing on new partners. Our niche with corporations is cause marketing, so when you purchase one of their products, it also benefits the Make-A-Wish Foundation. We work closely with corporations so that they accomplish business goals while helping us out. We try to make it mutually beneficial. No deal is a good deal unless it's a good deal for both sides.

How close is the relationship with the families when working on these wishes?

One thing we have to ensure is that it's the child's wish – not the dad's wish or the mom's wish. We have a pretty comprehensive process to make absolutely certain that it's the child's wish. We realize the entire family is engaged in the struggle, so depending upon what the wish is, we will absolutely engage the family. These wishes are made up of a lot of little things to make it magical, which is where family members are so important, because they know those little details that really light up the child.

Do you maintain a relationship with the kids after the wish is granted?

The relationship side is extremely challenging because in some cases, the child does not survive; but in a lot of cases, if they survive, the relationship remains strong. Our overriding

policy is that with wishes we grant, there are absolutely no strings attached because families deal with grief and illness in very different ways. We have some families who have their wish granted, and that's it. Maybe the child gets better, but they don't want to be reminded of that time in their child's life. However, we are seeing that families want that bond – not just with the foundation but with other families. The bond among these families is extremely strong. Whether they've lost their child or whether their child is still alive and has beaten an illness, that whole sense of community is very important.

When you came onboard, did you know right away this opportunity was right for you, and has it been what you expected?

Everybody was very open about what they thought the organization was doing well, what they didn't think the foundation was doing well, and what they thought they needed in a leader coming in. That was a big part of what attracted me to the organization. Many of the issues they were dealing with were ones I had dealt with at Habitat for Humanity, and it just felt like the right fit. Frankly, it's been better than I expected. We've had three very good years from a financial perspective. We have a strong balance sheet, and we're able to continue with some important projects that have long-term implications. It's nice to have the staying power to do things you know are going to benefit the organization long-term.

In your position, is it challenging for you to achieve life balance?

It's challenging because it's a national organization, and I have obligations across the country, but I always try to make sure there is some balance in my life. It's important in this position to be in good shape physically, so I make sure I get a lot of exercise. The other part is being spiritually grounded. This organization works with families who are dealing with life and death, and we're here to be a blessing to these families. We're helping people at a very difficult time in their lives, so it's important that we do it right, that we do what we say we're going to do, and that we bring joy to their lives. This is not an easy endeavor because these kids are dealing with challenges that no child should have to experience. We want to be a light at a dark time. ●

The smiles of children whose wishes have been granted by the Make-A-Wish Foundation.