CHILDREN'S NATIONAL

Magazine

CARE AND CURES FOR KIDS

WINTER 2026

Homecoming for Akosua

Innovative Heart Surgeries Help Rewrite Waylon's Future

Building Resilient Teens



"The doctors and nurses were my greatest support, especially because I was here alone."

— Afua, Akosua's mom

Children's National

Letter From the President & Chief Executive Officer



> **A key part of our strategic vision is making sure more families in our community can connect with Children's National when they need us."**
>
> — Michelle Riley-Brown

As we close out our 155th year, I am so grateful to dedicated supporters like you. The stories in this issue of our magazine showcase how we are building on our legacy by keeping kids at the center of everything we do. Your partnership makes this possible.

A key part of our strategic vision is making sure more families in our community can connect with Children's National when they need us. This issue highlights partnerships that widen our reach in Virginia and Maryland, giving more kids access to the best pediatric specialists and easing the burden of care for families navigating health issues.

Our cover story features the remarkable account of Afua and her daughter Akosua (p. 6). Afua gave birth at just 23 weeks, more than 5,000 miles from her home in Ghana. Our partnership with Reston Hospital Center in Virginia enabled Children's National neonatal experts to save Akosua's life. Our researchers are building on this kind of lifesaving care for micro-preemies by studying how better nutrition can help our tiniest and most vulnerable patients have the brightest possible futures (p. 10).

You will also read about how research and innovation can change a family's life. Waylon, a patient who gets some of his care close to home in Virginia, had multiple lifesaving novel surgeries to treat a serious congenital heart defect (p. 12). Thanks to Children's National, Waylon is at home surrounded by loved ones and focused on life as a smiley toddler.

This issue will take you behind the scenes with some of our brightest team members, who work tirelessly to improve care. Percival Kane, Jr., MHA, our executive vice president and chief of operations, shares what drives his dedication to shaping patient experience (p. 20). We also have a delightful profile on our resident gaming tech, Mike Cano, who helps kids cope while in the hospital (p. 18).

I wish you a beautiful holiday season, with deep gratitude for your partnership and commitment to the health of children in our region and beyond. I look forward to what we will accomplish in the new year.

With gratitude,

Michelle Riley-Brown

Michelle Riley-Brown, MHA, FACHE
President and Chief Executive Officer
Children's National



From left: Mariam Said, MD, with Afua, Akosua (in stroller) and Michelle Riley-Brown

CHILDREN'S NATIONAL CARE AND CURES FOR KIDS
Magazine

WINTER 2026

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Contents

6

CARE AND CURES

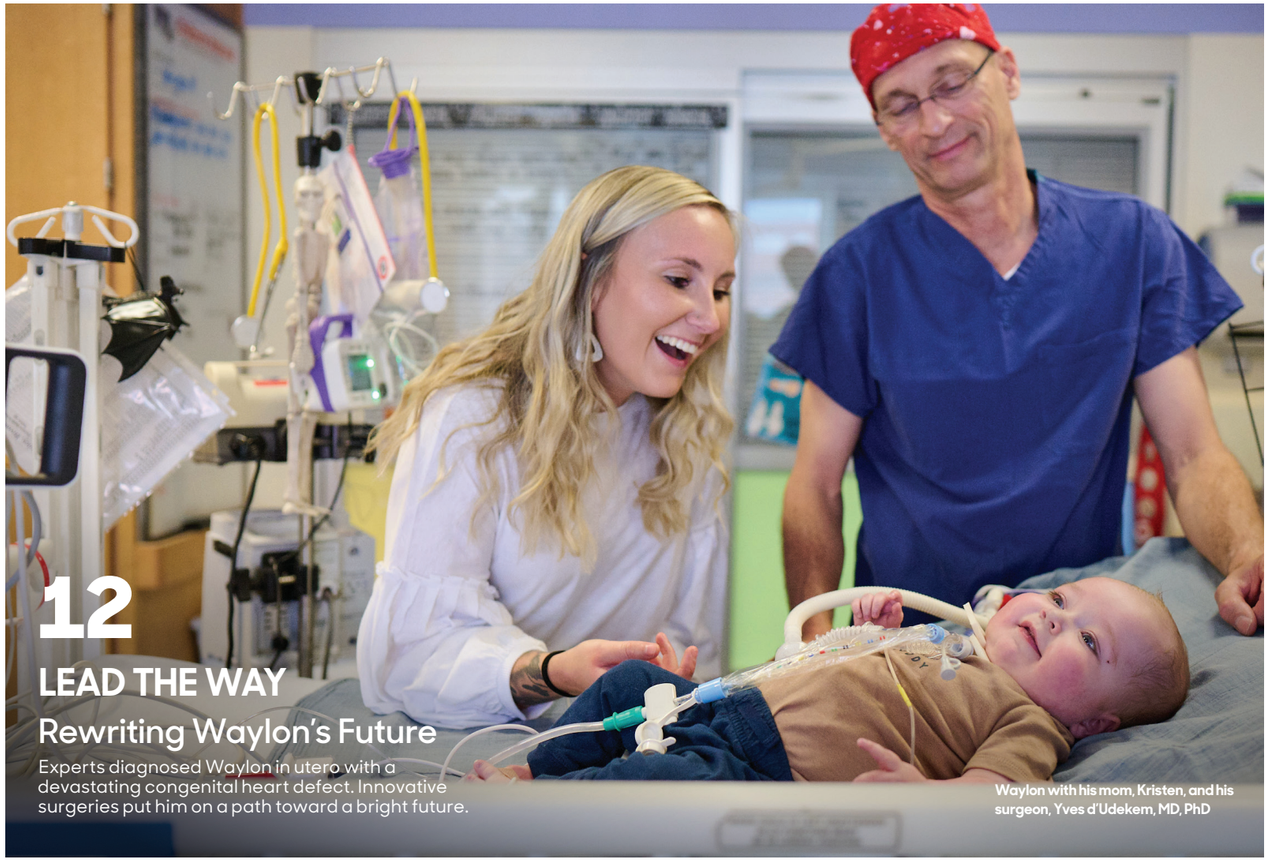
HOMECOMING FOR AKOSUA

Inside the Remarkable Neonatal Expertise That Gives Families Hope

When Afua gave birth at 23 weeks and 5,000 miles from home, our neonatology experts provided lifesaving care for her daughter. After a 172-day NICU stay, mom and baby are thriving at home in Ghana.



After 10 months of care with Children's National, Akosua and Afua reunite with their family in Ghana



12

LEAD THE WAY

Rewriting Waylon's Future

Experts diagnosed Waylon in utero with a devastating congenital heart defect. Innovative surgeries put him on a path toward a bright future.

Waylon with his mom, Kristen, and his surgeon, Yves d'Udekem, MD, PhD

16

MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Building Resilient Teens

A generous gift from the Wyss Medical Foundation helps provide — and expand — essential healthcare for teens.



18

THE ART OF HEALING

Game On for Joy

Meet our gaming tech, Mike Cano, who brings kids joy one game at a time, helping them heal and recover.



24

CREATE A LEGACY



The Founders Auxiliary: Dedicated to Building Brighter Futures

This visionary group has helped Children's National meet the moment for six generations.

30

A Patient's Perspective

At age 12, Kendric found a new beginning, thanks to an innovative gene therapy that alleviated his chronic pain from sickle cell disease.



20 IN PRACTICE

Q&A With Percival Kane, Jr., MHA

Our new chief of operations shares his vision for meaningful change that improves access to care for children and families and what he's most proud of as part of the Children's National family.

22 GIVE BACK YOUR OWN WAY

Teen Leaders Pay It Forward

Since 2020, local students in the Teens with Heartsongs program have raised nearly $1 million to comfort kids and families.

26 KIDS IN FOCUS

A Medal With Meaning

Jordyn and her family find a meaningful way to express their gratitude through our Race for Every Child Run/Walk.

Full Speed Ahead

Colin recovered from spinal fusion surgery and rowed his way to strength, confidence and a Maryland state championship.

Lydia Takes Center Stage

Lydia uses her musical talents to give back to the hospital that saved her life.

Spreading Smiles as Dr. Bear

Atticus volunteers as Dr. Bear, bringing smiles to children and families.

Teaming Up for Children's Health

We're partnering with professional athletes to give patients and families unforgettable experiences.

HOMECOMING FOR AKOSUA

Inside the Remarkable Neonatal Expertise That Gives Families Hope

Afua was 23 weeks pregnant when she visited the U.S. from Ghana to attend a family wedding. On day three of her trip, she felt unwell and visited a local emergency department. The visit would reveal that her labor had started dangerously early. The numbers weren't good: Her baby would be born four months early, 5,000 miles from home and face dangerous odds.

"I was alone and in a situation that felt surreal," she says. Her husband was at home in Ghana taking care of their 3-year-old daughter. While giving birth to a baby who needed critical care was not on her itinerary, expert neonatal care from Children's National would save her baby's life. And Afua wouldn't feel alone for long. Our Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU) team stayed by her side throughout this unexpected journey, providing expertise and comfort.

Today, Akosua is a lively 1-year-old who loves to play with her big sister. She is back home in Ghana, along with her adoring family.



Akosua with her family (above) and (right) in the NICU being held by her mom, Afua, for the first time


Akosua receives supportive breathing and nutrition care shortly after her birth

Critical First Days, Weeks and Months

Akosua weighed barely more than a pound (about the weight of a loaf of bread) when she was born at Reston Hospital Center in Northern Virginia, where Children's National neonatology specialists provide highly advanced care for the most fragile newborns. A team of doctors and nurses immediately whisked her away to the NICU. Afua's first introduction to her daughter was a picture on her phone.

Akosua fit in the palm of her mother's hand at first. They lived in the NICU for 172 days. Akosua's doctors supported her blood pressure, breathing, temperature regulation, nutrition and neurodevelopment. They also helped her through several pneumonia infections and a seizure.

"I have wonderful doctors in Ghana," Afua says, "but everyone told me that if Akosua had been born at 23 weeks there, her chances of survival would have been almost nonexistent. The doctors and nurses were my greatest support, especially because I was here alone."


Akosua's dad, visiting from Ghana, holds her

NICU Graduate

As Akosua's health stabilized, her care team remained focused on her growth. Ensuring micro-preemies receive adequate nutrition is essential to their development. While full-term babies are often ready to swallow and feed on their own, micro-preemies must learn these skills. Even as Akosua began weaning off the machines supporting her breathing and temperature regulation, she still had difficulty feeding on her own.

At the same time, Mariam Said, MD, our NICU medical director at Reston Hospital Center, notes that as soon as it is safe to transition from the hospital, babies benefit from being in the home environment, where they are cared for and surrounded by their families. A feeding tube procedure would enable Akosua to transition out of the hospital setting and continue to get the nutrition she needed at home.

"The idea of her needing surgery was daunting, but I wouldn't have to worry about every milliliter she took by mouth," Afua says. "The feeding tube ensured she got what she needed to grow."

Heading Home to Ghana

As Afua prepared to make the 5,000-mile journey back to Ghana, the team continued supporting Akosua, including removing her feeding tube.

"I was worried about returning home because Akosua will likely need specialist care for the first few years of her life," Afua says.

Annette Ansong, MD, one of the pediatric cardiologists on Akosua's team at Children's National, is originally from Ghana. She connected Akosua's parents with specialists there to make sure she continues getting great care. "Our job doesn't stop when our families leave the hospital," Dr. Ansong says.

"The beginning was difficult, but every person who entered our story seemed to be there at exactly the moment we needed them," Afua says. "Her survival feels like a gift. I'm grateful I was in the right place when it happened."


Annette Ansong, MD

The Best Care for Micro-Preemies, No Matter Where

A micro-preemie is one of the smallest and most medically fragile babies cared for in the NICU. Born months too soon, these infants arrive before their lungs, brain, digestive system and other organs have fully developed. They require highly specialized care, constant monitoring and extraordinary support as they continue the growth and development that would normally take place in the womb. Our team leverages a highly advanced suite of specialized micro-preemie technologies and tools to protect fragile organs, optimize growth and prevent brain injuries in infants born at the absolute limit of viability.



Through partnerships with regional NICUs, Children's National extends neonatal expertise beyond our main hospital to give micro-preemies the best chance at life.

"Everything we do is through the lens of optimizing both their short- and long-term outcomes for these tiniest of patients," says Dr. Said. Akosua required much of that technology, including heavy respiratory support.

> **"Everything we do is through the lens of optimizing both their short- and long-term outcomes for these tiniest of patients."**
>
> — Dr. Mariam Said



Tailored Nutrition *for* Our Tiniest Patients



James benefited from his family's care and optimized breast milk during his 133 days in the NICU



James flashes a healthy smile

> **"Everyone's newborn is unique, and studies such as NICU THRIVE allow us to specifically tailor interventions to optimize their health and improve their overall quality of life."**
>
> — Dr. Mariam Said

Our NICU never pauses its mission to keep tiny patients alive. Specialists rely on state-of-the-art equipment as they work around the clock. Yet their most effective medicine is often something science cannot replicate: mother's milk.

The Developing Brain Institute at Children's National is shedding light on this milk's power to help preterm infants. NICU THRIVE, a five-year randomized study of up to 150 babies born before 32 weeks, is assessing how best to boost the power of breast milk to support optimal growth and brain development.



"Families in the NICU can feel helpless, but providing their baby milk is often something they can do," says Katherine Ottolini, MD, a neonatologist who leads the research at our main hospital and Reston Hospital Center in Northern Virginia.

All participants undergo sophisticated milk analysis and brain imaging. Dr. Ottolini's team uses specialized machines to assess energy and macronutrient levels in the milk. Based on each infant's tailored nutrition plan and unique needs, the team adds supplements such as protein and fat. They also use magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) to measure structural and biochemical brain development. These steps may uncover new ways to make a long-term difference for some of our most vulnerable patients.

"No one expects to be in the NICU. I was terrified," says Shana, whose son James arrived at 24 weeks. A blood vessel in his heart failed to close after birth. He needed high levels of oxygen before surgery at 6 weeks old. "Each day after he was born was a miracle," Shana says.

James' health stabilized after the procedure, but he still faced nutritional deficits. Shana gladly enrolled him in NICU THRIVE. He became so big and strong that Dr. Ottolini called him "Baby Schwarzenegger." James left the NICU after 133 days. Today, he is an active toddler who loves eating, museums and story time.

The research, supported by the Gerber Foundation, will follow each participant through age 5. An additional grant from The Chu Family Foundation enables the team to provide mothers with Oura Rings. These finger-worn data trackers add a stream of rich data that helps the team understand how maternal factors such as sleep and stress patterns affect milk quality.

"Everyone's newborn is unique, and studies such as NICU THRIVE allow us to specifically tailor interventions to optimize their health and improve their overall quality of life," Dr. Said says.



Clinical research coordinator Renee Pen (left) and neonatologist Nickie Andescavage, MD, demonstrate MRI equipment to study vulnerable babies' brains

INNOVATIVE HEART SURGERIES HELP REWRITE WAYLON'S FUTURE



Waylon, in recovery from one of his surgeries, during a music therapy session



Waylon's parents first learned their baby had a critical heart defect at his 20-week ultrasound. No one expected him to survive. But Waylon would go on to defy the odds again and again. After he was born, care in our Cardiac Intensive Care Unit (ICU) and multiple novel surgeries performed by Chief of Cardiac Surgery Yves d'Udekem, MD, PhD, and his team helped save Waylon's life.

Pediatric cardiologist Stephanie Lacey, DO, FAAP, who works at the Children's National Richmond and Fredericksburg, Virginia, locations, initially diagnosed Waylon with a severe form of Ebstein's anomaly, a rare congenital heart defect.

"At 30 weeks, Dr. Lacey said Waylon had a 60% chance," Waylon's mom, Kristen, says. "But he just kept making it."

When Waylon was born at 37 weeks, a team of specialists rushed him to life support and worked to keep him alive. At 48 hours old, he underwent a complex open-heart surgery during which his care team essentially "turned off" half of his heart. They hoped the remaining muscle would adapt, strengthen and sustain his fragile body. It did.

In the months that followed — in hospital rooms filled with machines, tubes, alarms and constant vigilance — Waylon endured surgical procedures and two cardiac arrests, one of which stopped his heart for 24 minutes.

"There were no words," Kristen says. "It was devastating."

Defying terrible odds again, Waylon woke up smiling, a moment no one in the room will ever forget. Over the next few months in the Cardiac ICU, Waylon grew strong enough for Dr. d'Udekem and his team to consider an option performed only twice before at Children's National: a partial heart transplant.



Waylon with his mom, Kristen, and his surgeon, Yves d'Udekem, MD, PhD



Waylon enjoying life at home



Waylon on a family trip

A Custom Transplant

Based on years of research, a small number of surgeons in the U.S. have pioneered repairing damaged heart valves and blood vessels using donated tissue, preserving the healthy parts of the heart. Dr. d'Udekem pushed that approach further, planning to tailor it to Waylon's anatomy.

Rather than replacing his entire valve, the surgical team would use living tissue from a donor heart to replace only the parts of Waylon's heart that weren't working. This included one of three tiny tricuspid valve leaflets that control the flow between the heart's right atrium and right ventricle.

The plan depended on the availability of living donor tissue. The only alternative was to use a mechanical valve. This would mean a childhood filled with more open-heart surgeries and catheter interventions to adjust and replace it as Waylon grew.

Waylon's family waited months for a donor heart to be available. Eventually, they decided to move forward with a mechanical valve. But the day before the procedure, they learned a donor heart had become available.

Waylon became the first baby ever to have a tricuspid valve leaflet and other parts transplanted from a living donor heart. The pioneering surgery meant the implanted heart tissue would grow with him, potentially sparing him repeated surgeries in the future and offering a promising new approach for treating complex heart conditions in other children.

After more than a year in the hospital, Waylon went home just before Christmas in 2025. His family left with tremendous gratitude for the donor family and for Waylon's care team. He continues with follow-up care, but is mainly focused on living the toddler life, playing and laughing in ways that once seemed unimaginable. Kristen says he especially loves car rides with music playing and the wind on his face. "Waylon has a way of living every day to the fullest."

> **"Children's National allows ideas to spark innovation. This changes lives. It also gives me hope that more patients like Waylon — and children with even more severe challenges — will survive and go on to live full, healthy lives."**
>
> — Dr. Yves d'Udekem

Advancing the Next Chapter of Care

In 2026, we launched the Heart Research Institute, uniting our researchers and physician-scientists to turn discoveries into better care for children with heart disease. The institute started with a bold idea from Dr. d'Udekem, The Baier Family Distinguished Professor of Cardiac Surgery, and has been made possible thanks to our community of generous supporters.

It reflects our commitment and passion to redefine care and bring hope to families everywhere. The institute strengthens our ability to support the investigators, clinical teams and innovations that drive progress, including leading the way with valve and living tissue transplantations.

Dr. d'Udekem and Wayne Franklin, MD, MBA, senior vice president of the Heart and Lung Center and the A. James & Alice B. Clark Distinguished Professor of Cardiac Care, lead the institute. It focuses on five areas of research and innovation:

- Decode Heart Disease for Healthier Starts
- Care for Hearts and Minds
- Advance Heart Health for a Lifetime
- Harness Next Generation Technology
- Ensure Access to Cardiac Care

Building Resilient Teens

Research shows that the U.S. is experiencing a mental health crisis, especially among young people. Many teens in the District of Columbia face challenges including violence, food insecurity and mental health concerns at an important stage in their lives. Too often, they lack access to the support and care they need during this defining period of growth.

Thanks to a $5 million gift from the Wyss Medical Foundation, the Division of Adolescent and Young Adult Medicine at Children's National is closing care gaps for more teens than ever. The investment has enabled the division, led by pediatrician and Adolescent Medicine Specialist Anisha Abraham, MD, MPH, to add nine much-needed new team members. An additional physician who specializes in adolescent medicine will be hired in the next fiscal year.

These team members are already providing vital resources for teens with conditions ranging from anxiety and trauma related to gun violence, to eating disorders. The investment has enabled our adolescent medicine team to optimize clinician staffing, care coordination and psychosocial support. This means they can:

- **Care for more patients**
- **Shorten wait times**
- **Limit repeat visits to the Emergency Department**
- **Reduce hospitalizations**
- **Ensure proper outreach to families to decrease missed appointments**
- **Increase coordination of essential follow-up**



"This gift represents an important opportunity to help ensure adolescents and teens get the care they need. By expanding the team at Children's National, more young people can access medical care, mental health support and essential follow-up services. We are proud to support a trusted place that families can turn to when they need it most."

— Wyss Medical Foundation

Dr. Abraham reports a tangible ripple effect made possible by the Wyss gift. During a typical clinic day, for example, she might now have a care coordinator in the room during a patient appointment. This person handles checkout paperwork, discusses referrals such as to a nutritionist, and might organize transportation to the next appointment. A social worker stays in touch with patients after they leave.

"A parent recently told me she loved our clinic even though it had been a difficult visit for her teen," Dr. Abraham says. "With this support in place, we can provide seamless care and, sometimes, change life trajectories. It means the world to them, and to us."

The Division of Adolescent and Young Adult Medicine provides specialized healthcare designed specifically for adolescents and young adults to about 7,000 patients annually. This care is not available anywhere else in our region and helps ensure young people have access to mental health support when and where they need it.

Passion for Patients



In March, Dr. Abraham hired Lucy Hoagland as the team's program manager — the first position filled thanks to the 2025 Wyss gift. Lucy has played a critical role in building out the rest of the team, helping to recruit and fill seven other positions. "My role is all about helping the clinical team solve problems so they can spend more time working with children and families," Lucy says. "It's a new team, but everyone is very passionate about the patients we serve and already doing great work."

"Generosity from the Wyss Medical Foundation has ushered in an exciting time of growth for our division and has already made an enormous difference. We are so thankful and excited for the future."

— Dr. Anisha Abraham



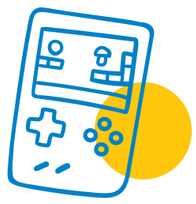
Brett and Mike enjoy gaming during an infusion at the main hospital

Game On for Joy

Giggles. Play. Friends. Gaming connects kids to fun and, often, their favorite people. At Children's National, patient gaming technology coordinator Mike Cano serves as the dedicated game master on our Child Life and Integrative Care Services team. His favorite "medical" equipment for kids in the hospital is a fleet of mobile carts loaded with consoles, headsets, controllers and power cords.

"For me, gaming has always been a means of connecting with others," says Mike, a lifelong gamer who has a background in technology and a master's degree in social work. He joined the team in late 2025 and sees kids for an hour at a time, typically during an appointment or twice a week during a hospitalization.

When not at the bedside with a controller in his hand or rolling a gaming cart into a patient's room, Mike broadcasts interactive games from Seacrest Studios so kids all over the hospital can join the fun. He also runs gaming activities in playrooms and teen rooms. He stocks adaptive controllers for kids with mobility challenges.



Benefits Backed by Science

For some patients, gaming provides relief from anxiety. Others love the opportunity to connect with friends and family at home or pass the time. Scientific research backs up the benefits of playing video games for children in the hospital. Gaming can provide a sense of control in an environment full of limited choices. It distracts kids from pain and reduces stress and feelings of isolation.

For 9-year-old Brett, gaming with Mike made traveling 200 miles each way to the hospital for twice-monthly infusions easier.

"Mike helped me forget I was tied to a machine, getting pumped full of medicine for five hours," says Brett, who has a life-threatening and rare genetic disease. "It was like we weren't going to the hospital for infusions. We were going to play with Mike."

A grant from Child's Play Charity makes the gaming technology position possible.

"Gaming does not magically make everything better, but it does give a kid something to look forward to. For me, being part of that joy has been the gift of a lifetime."

— Mike Cano

Scan to read more about Brett's story.





Brett and his care team



Extra Life is a Children's Miracle Network fundraising program that unites gamers to support pediatric healthcare. Their gaming marathons have raised nearly $460,000 for Children's National since 2023.



Q&A With Percival Kane, Jr.

Executive Vice President, Chief of Operations
Children's National

Percival Kane, Jr., MHA, the hospital's new chief of operations, might as well be known as the hospital's chief "hope" officer. His specialty? Turning challenges big and small into opportunities for positive growth. We talked to him about his vision for making sure patients can get care when and where they need it, the importance of strong donor partnerships and his family's new life in Washington, D.C.

What made you want to join Children's National?

Coming from adult hospital systems, the opportunity to work here, where children are the ultimate beneficiary of everything we do, offered me an incredible and important new perspective. It guides my daily decision-making and inspires me.

I also love solving problems. Sometimes this means making sure physicians or our team members are set up for success so they can provide the best care possible. Other times it might mean ensuring that patients can access the care they need or improving hospital spaces. It's all about safety, quality and giving our patients the best experience.

And after spending the last seven years in the brutal cold of Cleveland, the opportunity to move to a walkable city with four seasons did not hurt either!

What will your focus on patient experience and access mean for the community?

Since moving here, I've met many people who have a story about care at Children's National. People have also shared that it can be hard to get timely appointments.

Access and patient experience are deeply connected. When families can get the right appointment at the right time, it builds trust.

We want every family to feel cared for, listened to and supported at every step. When people have a great experience, they're more likely to come back when they need us, recommend us to others and remember how we made them feel during an otherwise stressful time.



Celebrating the hospital being top 10 in the nation for the 10th year in a row


Percival Kane, Jr., (right) with hospital leaders

What does improving access mean for you personally?

As a parent, I know that if my child had a medical issue, I would want them to be seen as soon as possible. Our goal is to make that happen — whether by hiring more clinicians, building more infrastructure in our call centers or expanding our facilities to see more patients. Referring physicians are already noticing the changes we've made to ensure their patients are seen with efficiency. Their confidence in our organization makes me certain that we are on the right track.

As an operator, I love puzzles, and access is the ultimate puzzle. The healthcare industry has struggled to solve the access dilemma, but a few institutions have succeeded. I want to partner with our team members to join the few that have succeeded in cracking that puzzle.

What makes you proud about working at Children's National?

There are so many things. First, our care, research and advocacy help children and families when they are at their most vulnerable. Second, I am in awe of my team. It is humbling to look around the table and see brilliant minds working together to ensure kids get the best care. My choice to join the Children's National family is validated every day.

How do our donors fit into this vision?

Our strategic plan is ambitious. It builds upon the expert care we're already providing in the region and around the world. None of this is possible without the partnership and commitment of our donors. It's no secret that pediatric institutions face funding challenges. Donors help ensure that we can treat every kid who comes through our doors with world-class care and do important research that stretches the limits of that care.

I've talked a lot about access. One of our donors, the Schattner Foundation, is partnering with us on our goal to make sure we can help more families. Their recent gift is directly impacting families by making it easier to make appointments and expediting provider referrals for specialized care.

How has your family adjusted to life in D.C.?

I've joked with a few colleagues that they're going to have to kick me out if they don't want me, because I love it here! I love exploring the different neighborhoods, the Metro and the restaurants. Everything is walkable. My oldest daughter just started at Howard University. My whole family is excited to be here.

> **"My choice to join the Children's National family is validated every day."**
>
> — Percival Kane, Jr.

Teen Leaders Pay It Forward

Serena was 4 when she took a serious tumble that fractured her skull. While she received lifesaving care at Children's National, the Heartsongs Fund delivered a care package to her family with blankets, snacks and unforgettable comfort.

"It was more than a basket," Serena says. "It brought us all joy during a really hard time."

Two decades later, Serena returns the gesture by fundraising and supporting a leadership program called Teens with Heartsongs. Grateful parents Lisa Friedlander and Ilana Kashdin co-founded it in 2020 to teach high school students about philanthropy and empower the next generation to give back. That spirit of generosity has inspired an exponential impact — for the teen leaders and the patient families they support at Children's National.

They sell baked goods, wash cars, host drive-in movie nights and offer puppy yoga classes to raise money.

More than a thousand students across 60 schools in Washington, D.C., Maryland and Virginia have raised $1 million through the program over six years.

Scan to learn more about Teens with Heartsongs:



From left: Lisa Friedlander, former student director Katharine Kringel, and Ilana Kashdin at the 20th anniversary celebration of the Heartsongs Fund



Serena as a newborn with her mom, Marti Cullen, who served on the Heartsongs Fund board

A Heartfelt Legacy

Lisa Friedlander created the Heartsongs Fund in 2001, inspired by the compassionate care she and her daughter, Jaclyn, received at Children's National. She named the fund in honor of Mattie Stepanek, a longtime patient and poet who wrote the bestselling collection "Heartsongs." Mattie passed at age 13 from a rare form of muscular dystrophy. Over two decades, the fund raised more than $2.5 million to support patient families and spread Mattie's message of hope.



Lisa Friedlander (right) presents a check with Jeni Stepanek, PhD, Mattie's mom

The program has supported accommodations for nearly 1,150 patient families, helping them stay close through difficult treatments and frequent appointments. "These acts of kindness are anthems of hope, care and community," says Nikki Scurlock, travel and accommodations coordinator at Children's National. "They ease burdens for families and allow them to focus on healing."

In 2025, Lisa and Ilana established an endowed housing fund at Children's National to sustain their impact. Since then, they have refocused fundraising efforts to support Child Life and Integrative Care Services, helping families cope through play, expressive activities and more.

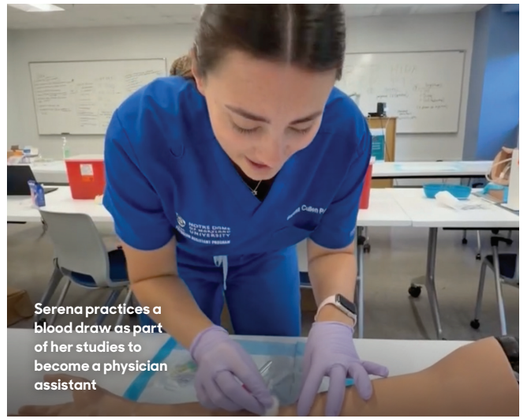
"Teens discover a real sense of humanity when they learn what other kids their age are going through and watch their faces light up when they talk about how art, music or pet therapy helped them," Lisa says.

Mason, a high school senior, volunteers in a leadership role as co-director of social media for Teens with Heartsongs.

"Younger generations have a lot of power," he says. "The teens in this program all care about making a difference in our community, and that connects us beyond our schools or social bubbles. Making an impact is more important than any grade on a transcript."

Guest lectures from grateful families and community leaders, hospital tours and volunteer opportunities deepen the students' skills and commitment. "Teens see the comforts they may have taken for granted, pause and gain a new perspective," Ilana says. "They carry that with them forever."

After serving on the teen board, Serena has continued to support the program through college and graduate school. She plans to return to the hospital in 2027 in a rotation for her physician assistant program.



Serena practices a blood draw as part of her studies to become a physician assistant

"If I have the opportunity to work in the emergency room, I'll be with families on what might be the worst day of their lives and try to make it better. That's what makes Teens with Heartsongs so rewarding. It's infectious to see others giving back and easing a family's hospital stay."

— Serena

The Founders Auxiliary: Dedicated to Building Brighter Futures



From left: Founders Auxiliary Chair Chandrani Ghosh, Michelle Riley-Brown and Auxiliary Vice Chair Charlotte Safos at A Vintage Affair 2026

From the start of its history, tireless community support and volunteerism have made it possible for Children's National to care for children when they need us most.

In the late 1800s, two groups of visionary women — the Board of Lady Visitors (later known as the Board of Visitors) and the Children's Health Board — set out to ensure that kids in Washington, D.C., had access to pediatric-focused care. The Board of Lady Visitors raised funds for the hospital's first building. The Children's Health Board focused on the broader community, beginning with care for Civil War orphans.

In 2021, these organizations joined forces to form the Children's National Founders Auxiliary. Today, the Auxiliary carries that spirit forward by improving and expanding services for more families. They have raised millions to fund annual grants at Children's National through events such as A Vintage Affair and the Charity Polo Cup.

One recent grant provided by the Auxiliary is helping to reduce crowding in our Emergency Department (ED). Sarah Isbey, MD, a pediatric emergency medicine physician, saw the challenge intensify during the "tripledemic" of flu, RSV and COVID-19. "When we saw delays in treatment affecting our ability to care for patients in a timely manner, we looked to the Auxiliary for support for innovative strategies," she says.

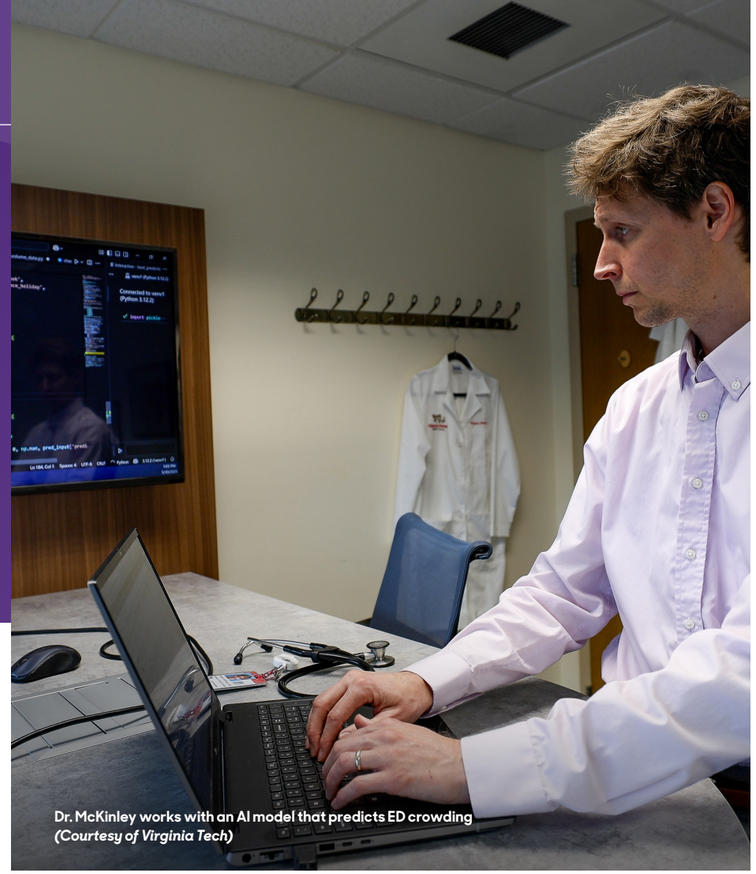
Dr. Isbey, working with Kenneth McKinley, MD, an emergency medicine colleague and researcher, developed a process to mobilize a surge team during busy ED periods.

Dr. McKinley worked with a team that included AI experts from both Children's National and Virginia Tech to build a model that evaluates patient volume, wait times and system strain. When the model predicts a surge, it prompts additional staff to step in. That approach made it possible to care for 6,000 ED patients in March 2026, one of its busiest months in years.

"The model made an enormous difference in our ability to care for such a large number of patients," Dr. McKinley says. The team plans to pilot the program at other hospital EDs. They are also exploring AI tools that help clinicians more quickly prioritize waiting patients.

The effort, launched with institutional grants from Children's National and Virginia Tech, is an example of how Children's National is using AI more broadly to turn insights into action. It also reflects the Auxiliary's long commitment to patient-centered solutions.

"We were thrilled to support this project, which brings fresh thinking to a challenge families and clinical teams face every day," Auxiliary Chair Chandrani Ghosh says. "It reflects the heart of our mission: connecting more children with the expert care they need."



Dr. McKinley works with an AI model that predicts ED crowding *(Courtesy of Virginia Tech)*

> "For the first time as an ED doctor, I feel hopeful about our ability to address the chronic problem of ED crowding."
>
> — Dr. Kenneth McKinley



Our Emergency Department team moves a patient with care



From left: Auxiliary members Kim Summerville, Vicki Campbell and Suzi Henderson set up activities in the Bunny Mellon Healing Garden

Auxiliary-funded work also includes:

- A pioneering telehealth command center that monitors cardiac patients
- Holistic pain relief for patients with sickle cell disease
- Fun programming in Seacrest Studios, our interactive broadcast studio
- Support for our Eating Disorders Clinic
- Groundbreaking immunotherapy research for cancer treatment

Auxiliary members also give back in person through special events, blood drives and comfort cart shifts.

Kids in Focus

A Medal With Meaning

Jordyn's first Valentine's Day at 2 months old went from sweet to sour in a matter of minutes. Her breathing did not sound right, and her hand began to twitch. Alarmed by her unusual movements, Jordyn's parents, Naadira and Dareic, rushed to their local hospital. Testing revealed fluid in Jordyn's brain. A medevac team delivered her to Children's National for emergency surgery. Soon after, she became unresponsive and experienced a seizure.

Her neurosurgeon, John Myseros, MD, comforted Jordyn's parents through her recovery, reminding them that children's brains are incredibly resilient.

"As a faith-based family, that encouragement changed everything," Naadira says. "It shifted how we showed up for Jordyn.

> **"Seeing her shine at the Race makes us want to keep fundraising and advocating for more families like ours."**
>
> — Naadira, Jordyn's mom



Jordyn poses with Dr. Bear at the 2026 Race for Every Child

We sang to her, played music and danced in her hospital room. Those moments mattered."

Jordyn needed additional procedures and surgery before fully recovering. In the year that followed, she got back on track with her developmental milestones. At a year old, she no longer needed anti-seizure medication and has continued to thrive ever since. Now 9, she excels as an honor roll student, a cheerleader and a fashion designer who sews her own clothing.

Her family participates in the Race for Every Child 5K Run/Walk every fall to show their gratitude. This year, Jordyn designed the artwork for the Kids Dash medals. Young finishers proudly wore them as they celebrated their victories at Freedom Plaza in Washington, D.C.

A record-breaking 10,726 supporters registered to race in-person and virtually. The 2026 event raised more than $2.2. million to elevate pediatric care.

"The first time Jordyn did jumping jacks, I cried," Naadira says. "Seeing her shine at the Race makes us want to keep fundraising and advocating for more families like ours."



Full Speed Ahead

Colin, 15, has faced plenty of choppy waters on his way to becoming a Maryland state rowing champion during his first year of high school. Among them: medical challenges throughout his life that have made him a deeply resilient person. Experts at Children's National diagnosed Colin with neurofibromatosis type 1 as an infant. The genetic condition can cause discolored skin, tumors and skeletal issues. Eventually, it affected his spine.

By seventh grade, severe scoliosis gripped Colin's back. In March 2024, Matthew Oetgen, MD, director of Orthopaedic Surgery and Sports Medicine and the Joseph E. Robert, Jr. Professor of Orthopaedic Surgery and Sports Medicine, performed a spinal fusion surgery.

Recovery took time and grit, but Colin and his family felt supported throughout.

"Children's National has always taken such good care of us — from the way the departments work together to the way they've cared for Colin and us as parents," his mom, Kathleen, says.

As a freshman, Colin saw a flyer that would open a new chapter for him: a call to join the rowing team. Despite intense practices, he relished the challenge. Thanks in part to his care team, he also felt ready.

He built strength and made friends. This spring, he and his team won a race called the "Novice Eight." The victory demonstrated his progress in recovery.

"Would I have imagined him here after surgery? No," Kathleen says. "But he loves rowing, and he's so much happier. Watching him on the water is amazing."

Now a high school sophomore, Colin is enjoying life. He's also imagining where rowing may take him next, perhaps even to college-level competition.

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>
> — Kathleen, Colin's Mom



Colin helps his high school crew team capture a Maryland State Championship title


Lydia performs at the Children's Ball

Lydia Takes Center Stage

Lydia grew up dreaming of becoming an opera singer. But at age 12, she developed flu-like symptoms that never went away. Her vision deteriorated. By 14, she had lost peripheral vision on one side.

Our experts diagnosed her with pediatric low-grade glioma, the most common central nervous system tumor in children. As a teen, Lydia underwent major surgery and spent years receiving chemotherapy and other treatments while balancing high school.

The turning point came when her care team suggested she enroll in an innovative clinical trial. It would use a new molecular targeted therapy for her specific kind of cancer.

"My care team stood by my side every step of the way," Lydia says. "They gave me the strength I needed to pursue my musical passions: opera and musical theater."

As a result of treatment, her tumor shrank and then stopped growing altogether.

Today, Lydia studies music education in college and loves giving back to the hospital. Recently, she performed for patients and families in the Costco Wholesale Atrium with Opera Italiana is in the Air, a renowned international program that brings free opera to audiences around the world.

In April, she opened the hospital's Children's Ball with a moving performance. While on stage, Lydia spoke about her experience, and her gratitude, to nearly 1,000 attendees. She shared a moving account of how expert, compassionate care helped her overcome challenges, inspired her future and enables her to do what she loves.

Scan to watch Lydia's story in one of PBS's Emmy-winning Medical Stories features.

Atticus Spreads Smiles as Dr. Bear

Dr. Bear, the lovable Children's National mascot, is a source of smiles for kids, families and the community. For Atticus, 17, what began as a community service opportunity quickly became something more meaningful. He has stepped into the role many times over the past two years. When he slips on the big bear paws, pulls on Dr. Bear's giant head and straightens the lab coat, Atticus is Dr. Bear.

"Some of the kids that I meet have spent their lives in and out of the hospital," he says. "No matter how I'm feeling, when I'm in the suit, I'm happy because they're excited to see Dr. Bear."



Atticus spreads joy as Dr. Bear

Atticus first stepped into the suit in 2024 at the Van Metre 5K Run, which supports Children's National. He quickly saw how a simple costume could create special moments and says the role keeps him grounded.

"Seva" means selfless service, he explains. "It is an important value in my Indian and Punjabi heritage," Atticus says. "It means putting yourself aside to serve other people and the community. Being Dr. Bear is a great way to do that."

This year, Atticus gave hugs, posed for pictures and danced as Dr. Bear at the Dunkin' Prom, the Race for Every Child and other events. As a tennis enthusiast, he was especially excited to volunteer on Kids' Day at the Mubadala DC Open.

"When I'm in the suit, it's not about me," he says. "Dr. Bear brings happiness. I'm just lucky to be the one on the inside."

Teaming up for Children's Health

Taylor, 9, is a dedicated soccer player who dreams of playing the sport as a professional. Last year, a leukemia diagnosis sidelined her during treatment, but it never dampened her love of the game or her big ambitions.

Treatment at Children's National has gotten her back to the playing field in more ways than one. Thanks to the hospital's partnership with the Washington Spirit, this past summer the team invited Taylor to serve as honorary captain for their Cancer Awareness Day match. She spent time on the field, oversaw the coin toss and met players she admires, including the team's star forward, Trinity Rodman.

"When I walked onto the field, I was so excited," she says. "Treatment can be hard, but having the Spirit players behind me gives me hope."

Taylor's mom Andrea loved that the opportunity gave her daughter the chance to forget about her illness and just have fun. "Taylor was so herself, so alive, so in that moment of joy with the team," she says. "For a minute, cancer disappeared."


Taylor helps kick off the Cancer Awareness Day match (above), Taylor and Trinity (left)

The Power of Partnerships

Professional sports teams and Children's National help kids like Taylor win on and off the field. Partnerships with the Washington Spirit, Mubadala DC Open, Washington Commanders and Loudoun United Football Club provide experiences that bring happiness, celebrate healing and spread awareness about our hospital.


Washington Commanders player Terry McLaurin with patient ambassadors at a training camp event



A Patient's Perspective

Kendric Soars Into an Era of Hope

Kendric was tired of leaving the party early. Diagnosed with sickle cell disease at birth, he had faced severe pain crises his whole life. Even trying to enjoy everyday moments, like celebrating a friend's birthday, could land him in the emergency department. At age 12, Kendric became the first commercial patient in the nation to begin an FDA-approved gene therapy for pediatric treatment at Children's National.

Now 14, Kendric is free from the pain of sickle cell disease. His care team inspired him to pursue a career in medicine one day, so he can help kids like him live their fullest lives.

Tell us about a time someone went above and beyond to care for you.

It's hard to pick just one. During my many hospital stays, so many doctors, nurses and team members truly cared for my whole family. Nurses checked on me on their days off or during lunch so my parents could take a break. I had a tough time eating after chemotherapy, so two of my nurses went to the grocery store to find snacks I might enjoy. I wish I could thank every person who took the extra time to care for us.

How has your daily life changed since completing the gene therapy?

I no longer worry about the temperature or weigh the options between participating with pain versus missing out for comfort. I'm also a lot more athletic. I am learning to ride a bike, swim and play golf. It's a new freedom I thought I'd never experience.

What do you wish other kids and teens with chronic conditions knew?

They are not alone. We all have something we are going through. Be brave and reach out to other kids because you may be able to lift each other up.



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