



Kids helping kids

One organization is out to cheer up hospital-bound children—and its CEOs aren't even old enough to drive.

BY GAETANO POLLICE

In many families, certain words are off-limits for kids to say, but in the Leinwand household, one word is particularly unutterable. "We don't use the word *can't* in my house," explains dad Michael Leinwand. "There's no such thing as 'you can't do it.' You might need a lot of time, a lot of energy, and a lot of help, but you *can* do it."

The proof is Crayons4Kids, the nonprofit organization created by Emily, 14, and Matt, 13, Michael's children—and Crayons4Kids' CEOs. Its mission is as straightforward as it is ambitious: Bring smiles to children in hospital beds across America. As you can probably guess, they do it with crayons—but much more, too.

Emily and Matt's idea was born eight years ago. Back then, Michael was working upward of 140 hours a week as a resident at Los Angeles County—University of Southern California Medical Center, and he wanted to spend a little more time with his kids. So, he started bringing them to work on occasion. While walking around the hospital with their dad, Emily and Matt, then six and five, noticed the kids who were patients there. "They were really sad," Emily says. "We thought about what we could do to brighten their days. So we collected crayons and coloring books for them."

Their endeavor has grown into an undertaking that engulfs the Leinwands' entire basement, with



toys and games organized according to boys and girls of different age groups. The family, including mom Janis, now lives in Kalamazoo, Michigan—Michael is a pediatric surgeon at the Children's Hospital at Bronson—and they mail gift baskets to children in hospitals all across the country. To date, those have included 26 DVD players; more than 500 movies; 21,500 new coloring books; 1,200 baby rattles; 11,000 games and toys; and more than 205,500 individual crayons.

Crayons4Kids raises about \$5,000 a year, and all donations go directly to the purchase of gifts for hospital-bound kids, as well as any shipping costs. The Leinwands do their best to meet all requests, which anyone anywhere can make via crayons4kids.com. For a hospital in Philadelphia where Michael previously worked, for example, the Leinwands raised funds to provide the cancer center with six PlayStation2 video game systems,



Crayons4Kids founders Matt and Emily bring cheer—and cool toys—to children.

which kids can play while receiving chemotherapy treatments.

Matt and Emily both say the best reward for their work is the connections they make. "I remember a parent who came up to me," Matt says. "She said, 'I can't believe you're doing this. You don't even know who I am.' It puts everything in perspective." ●

To learn more about Crayons4Kids, to donate, or to request a gift for a child in the hospital, visit crayons4kids.com.