**Gulf Coast Western’s Record-Breaking Toy Drive Brings Christmas to Thousands of Kids Battling Cancer**

Gulf Coast Western and the Sadie Keller Foundation are on a mission to provide Christmas joy to kids who are in the hospital, stricken with cancer.

The day Gulf Coast Western hosts its company Christmas party has become a day its Dallas office transforms into a hub with a truckload of toys to be loaded onto Sadie’s Sleigh -- the charity’s means of distributing toys to 11 hospitals covering all of Dallas-Fort Worth, plus treatment facilities in Austin, Houston and five other states.

At the core of the relationship are two cancer survivors, Gulf Coast Western CEO Matt Fleeger and 13-year-old Sadie Keller.

“I have a survivor’s compassion for the emotional and physical impact cancer can have on an adult, but I could not fathom what it takes for a child to endure the suffering, treatments and emotions,” Fleeger said.

In 2020, the friendship was tested by the pandemic that forced the entire world to change its focus. COVID didn’t stop kids from getting cancer. It only piled onto their problems.

Because of COVID protocol, hospitalized kids no longer get to be around each other in common area playrooms. Their visitors are often limited to a single parent.

“In any given year, your heart goes out to these families and these children in the oncology wards. Removed from their home, removed from friends and family,” said John Engel, chief operations officer for Gulf Coast Western. “Typically, they can only see immediate family and other kids in hallways and the playrooms. But this year, they can’t socialize because of COVID.”

Charities that provide relief, like the Sadie Keller Foundation, are facing the economic brunt of the pandemic. The Foundation had to cancel its annual Yellow Ball fundraiser. Some individual contributors are tapped from helping people in need since the spring, when COVID hit. Others are among those now out of work.

“It is my goal to not only collect over 10,000 toys for kids fighting childhood cancer in a hospital during a pandemic,” said Sadie, who has collected toys for kids who are spending their holiday season in a hospital since her own Acute Lymphoblastic Leukemia diagnosis at age 7. “To hope they all get what they want for Christmas and maybe just have a smile for a minute.”

All told, it’s a huge burden for 13-year-old shoulders. But Sadie’s relationship with Gulf Coast Western is deeper than corporate partners who cut a check. These are friends.

“This year was different. I’m so proud of my Gulf Coast Western coworkers. They really stepped it up,” said Tim Taylor, executive vice president. “Even with a tough year for an oil company, it pales in comparison to what they are going through.”

With Fleeger matching his employees’ contributions, Gulf Coast Western increased its contribution to Sadie’s Sleigh by 25% over 2019 with thousands of toys donated.

The shopping is done personally, with employees matching their strengths to specialize in age groups, often playing off their own parental expertise to find gifts that fit from toddlers to teens. Once it’s known they’re on a mission for cancer-stricken kids, Engel said the Gulf Coast Western shopper employees feed off the energy of workers and others in the store who watch in awe as thousands of dollars in gifts come off the shelves.

“Our focus changed to toys they could play with in their rooms,” Taylor said. “We shifted away from bicycles or Power Wheels and focused on toys like Nintendo Switch, Oculus, action figures and even wireless headphones. We really wanted to get items that could provide ways to pass the time and enjoy in their confined spaces.”

Clearly, they are toys any kid would want, continuing what the foundation praises as the company’s track record of getting the gifts just right.

“It’s about emotional support,” said Sarah Keller, Sadie’s mom. “To allow a child who’s fighting cancer to still be a kid. To help their mental health that they’re able to fight.”

In addition to the toy donations, Fleeger has also purchased more than a handful of Sadie’s paintings – artwork that supports all aspects of the foundation.

Just as Sadie has other donors, her foundation is but a slice of the charitable portfolio for Fleeger and the company. Gulf Coast Western is also involved with the North Texas Food Bank, Children’s Medical Center, Shriner’s Hospitals, St. Jude Children’s Hospital, Magdalene House and Smile Train.

Most of Gulf Coast Western’s Boise, Idaho, office employees were also able to join in the 2020 presentation for Sadie’s Sleigh.

“At the end of the day, when we’re all together at the company Christmas party with our spouses, the toy donation is still all the buzz, separate from the awards and the other traditions of the event,” Taylor said. “It’s the best team-building exercise we’ve ever done.”

Just as Sadie was unable to see the emotions of the children at the receiving end of the gifts this season, the masks worn at the gathering prevented the corporate and charity friends from seeing the smiles when the lobby full of gifts were presented and loaded on the truck by dozens of Gulf Coast Western employees.

But the feeling in their hearts was the same, maybe even better, than at previous Christmases.

“It’s what makes them different,” Sarah Keller said. “Even in hard times they come through and come through big. They’ve showed up for us in a year that it matters most.”