



Children and Families Find a Place *Where Dreams Come True!*

By JON SALM

The Sunshine Foundation is "dedicated to giving children and families something they could not otherwise afford," said Kate Sample, the foundation's president.

In the mid-1970s, Kate's husband, Bill Sample, was working as a police officer at St. Christopher's Hospital for Children in Philadelphia when he got an idea that would change the lives of over 36,000 children.

Sample started the Sunshine Foundation with the sole purpose "to answer the dreams of chronically ill, seriously ill, physically challenged and abused children, ages three to eighteen; whose families cannot fulfill their requests due to the financial strain that the child's illness may cause."

The Sunshine Foundation differs from other organizations like the Make-a-Wish foundation because it grants wishes to children with lifelong illnesses, not just life-threatening ones. Many Sunshine Foundation dream recipients suffer from cerebral palsy, severe autism, and Down Syndrome, to name a few.

The foundation is the oldest wish granting organization in the United States. It has been granting wishes since 1976. After more and more children began requesting to go to Disney World, the Sunshine Foundation broke ground on a 'Dream Village' in Eastern Polk County in 1988. The village is located in Loughman, near the Polk and Osceola County border, just 15 miles to Disney, Universal, and other Orlando area attractions.

"Bill's dream was the Dream Village," said Kate Sample, who has served as the foundation's president since her husband's retirement two years ago.



The village's nine themed cottages each have a unique and magical theme, including a space cottage, an enchanted forest cottage, and one dedicated to celebrating Christmas all year.

After five years of fundraising and a year of construction, the first guests visited the Dream Village in January of 1990. The village boasts an Olympic-size handicap accessible swimming pool, a miniature golf course and a playground complete with a wheelchair-friendly swing. Over 20,000 children have visited the village since it opened.

"The families usually come on a Thursday and leave on a Monday," said Sample. "We pay for airfare, theme park tickets, rental cars, and give them expense money so that it truly costs them nothing. In a lot of cases, it's the family's only vacation in years. It's a once in a lifetime opportunity for them."

The children get their pick of which Orlando area resorts to visit. Disney, Universal, and Sea World have been popular destinations for years, but the dream village's location in Polk County also makes it a short drive to Legoland in Winter Haven.

Before the park's grand opening, Legoland invited two Sunshine Foundation wish recipients to attend a VIP open house.

"We really are grateful for Legoland and their support for our children," Sample said.

The Sunshine Foundation relies on a small, dedicated staff, teams of volunteers, and personal donations to grant over 250 wishes each year. Eighty-three percent of the foundation's budget goes towards answering dreams.

Sample describes the organization as a "grassroots charity." "Bill likes to say that we are people-ly funded," she said. "We are supported by everyday people."

Individuals not only help the organization financially, but by donating their time. Volunteers do most of the groundwork and office work at the Dream Village, according to Sample.

The Sunshine Foundation is always looking for volunteers and donations, said Sample. Information about how to volunteer, donate, or refer a child can be found at Sunshinefoundation.org.

"Some of these children will live the rest of their lives in wheelchairs, or in and out of therapy, doctor's offices, or surgeries," Sample said. "We're here to give them a little sunshine in their life."



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