

Q&A with Tracy's Kids Founder and Chairman Matt Gerson

Admired as a trailblazer for art therapy, Matt Gerson is a Washington, DC-based music executive who established *Tracy's Kids* as an independent charity. Since 1998, he has orchestrated almost \$4 million in philanthropic support to help children with cancer cope with the emotional stress imposed by the disease and its treatment. \$1.6 million has benefited children and families at Children's National—where the program is donated at no cost to our patients. This is an excerpt of an interview he gave in December 2013.

Q: How did you first get involved in art therapy for kids with cancer?

A: I was diagnosed with cancer in 1968, when I was 10 years old. Back in the day, nobody talked about cancer. It was the "c" word. It was whispered. Thankfully, I didn't lose my hair so nobody I was growing up with knew I was sick. I was in 5th, 6th, and 7th grade and would wait my turn sitting in the phone booth of the adult clinic in the Bronx hospital where I was treated. Now I understand that I was hiding. As a child you are especially confused, and scared, and don't get it. To this day, I don't get it.

On my 40th birthday, I decided I would do something for kids enduring a dreadful chapter in their lives. Through the Prevent Cancer Foundation,

I was introduced to Tracy Councill at Georgetown University Hospital. I saw what she was doing and was hooked. We had a fundraiser at the Motion Picture Association featuring the jazz band from the Duke Ellington high school and raised \$50,000 that first night. 16 years later I am still at it and we now fund four separate clinics.

Q: What is the power of art therapy?

A: The best quote I've ever heard about *Tracy's Kids* came from one of the docs who treats our kids: "It is not unusual to walk into our clinic and see children with infusions in their arms, crayons in their hands, and smiles on their faces." That's how I see it too—they are at an art table with similarly situated kids and the masters-trained art therapists. Parents regularly tell me their children look forward to going to the clinic. That's inconceivable to me. The kids know they're going to get sick, they're not with their school friends, they're missing soccer, but they look forward to coming because of the easy engagement with the therapists and other kids sharing a lousy, unfair experience.

My favorite *Tracy's Kids* story involved a kid from an unstable family background who was going through a bone marrow transplant without much parental support. He made two hand puppets—one he called



Dr. Bones. Through the puppets he made it clear that he thought that the doctors were going to take out his bones and replace them with new ones. Our art therapists conveyed that to the medical team which caused the doctor to take another run at explaining what was going to happen and allaying the boy's concerns. To me that's the essence of what we're trying to do. I remember enduring several scary procedures plus chemo and radiation, and we're helping kids deal with such experiences through art.

Q: How have you grown *Tracy's Kids'* fundraising so successfully?

A: I get by with a little help from my friends—actually, a lot of help. For example, David Cohen at ComcastNBCU visited the clinic, saw what we do and said “we’re in.” ComcastNBCU now underwrites our annual fundraiser and produces a segment each

year to inform DC area viewers about the program. I get a lot of support from my colleagues at the studios and we host a unique movie-themed event where 500 Washingtonians walk the red carpet before watching one of six nominated and award-winning films during Hollywood's award season. We also have a lot of encouragement from Members of Congress. Marcelle and Patrick Leahy have been at every event from day one. As fate would have it, they saw the value of the programs first hand when the son of the Senator's Chief Counsel was a beneficiary of the program, as was their grandchild's good friend. This year, Dave Camp, Chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee, is one of our red carpet hosts. Florida Congresswoman Debbie Wasserman Schultz and many others attend each year to show their support. *Tracy's Kids* has recognized Marcelle, Dave, and Debbie for the way that they confronted their own battles with cancer.