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Newsmaker of the Year: Friends of We Care's Kevin Collins



Kevin Collins, executive director of Friends of We Care.

By Leslie Wu

Friends of We Care Foundation, Inc. executive director Kevin Collins has known with absolute certainty what he's wanted to do with his life since he was 12 years old. As an ambassador of the Easter Seal Society speaking about cerebral palsy, Collins remembers waiting backstage to address 1,200 people at a Conn Smythe dinner in 1976 and the nervousness he felt waiting to be piped into the room on the shoulders of Canadian wrestler Whipper Billy Watson.


"I recall, like it was yesterday, being hoisted up on Whipper's shoulders and being absolutely frightened because he was a giant of a man. But when he put his arms around my legs, I knew that it was such a secure feeling, that I wasn't going anywhere," Collins told ORN. "It was an incredible moment for me."

As Collins finished his speech and the applause rang out across the room, he remembers that sense of purpose he hoped would stay with him throughout his career. "I knew that I wanted to do this—to connect to people—and I knew that I wanted to do it forever," he said.

From receiving the Queen's Jubilee Medal twice in the last decade to rappelling down the side of the 32-storey RioCan Yonge-Eglinton Centre, this year's Newsmaker of the Year has spent his life embodying the principle that he cites as the foundation of Friends of We Care and Easter Seals: anybody, given the chance, will succeed.

"On a personal level, not only does this role encompass my hospitality background, but also my being born with a disability and being part of the Easter Seals program, which in my heart I truly believe in and will support forever," says Collins. "It's kind of a nice full circle for me."







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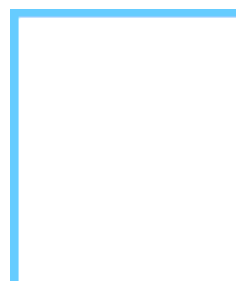
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Collins' career began when he graduated in 1985 from Georgian College's School of Hospitality and Management and was hired by Howard Johnson Hotels on the premise of being a shopper for their properties for the first year. "I travelled across Canada, shopped their hotels and ate in their restaurants and slept in their beds. What was interesting was that they wanted to get the perspective of a person with a disability and get an understanding of the demographics of the older clientele that were big stayers at the hotels and chains," said Collins. "It was a very big and unique opportunity for me and a great learning one."

Collins then went into the chain's management training program and stayed with them for seven years, becoming a rooms division manager of a 292-room property in Scarborough before leaving for an opportunity with Easter Seals.

While volunteering with the organization at an event in 1991, the executive director and the director of development approached him. "They said, 'Why don't you come and work for us? It would be perfect.' And at the time, I was just like, 'What do I know about special events, truly?'" he laughs.

After working his way up to manager of corporate and special events at Easter Seals, acting as a liaison between the Ontario branch and Friends of We Care, Collins was approached by the Friends of We Care board in 1999.

"They said, 'We'd like to take our organization to the next level and we feel that you'd be the person,' and 15 years later, here we are," he says.

With a three-person office staff (whom Collins thanks before he leaves each and every day), Friends of We Care relies on its 1,000 to 1,200 volunteers across Canada to put on annual events such as karaoke, golf tournaments and galas to raise money for Easter Seals to send children to summer camp. Bowling events, such as a superhero-themed fundraiser in November in Toronto, raised \$188,000 for the cause. "To be able to watch the success of the bowling event over the years has been absolutely incredible," says Collins, who is hoping to bring the event to every province across Canada.

All money raised at each event goes towards the camp, and member fees cover administration costs throughout the year.

Friends of We Care celebrated its 30th anniversary in 2013, having raised close to \$17 million since inception, sending more than 38,000 children to enjoy the experience at camp. The organization, which includes 85 members from the foodservice industry, gives \$1 million each year to completely fund 500 kids (5,000 camp days every summer), and is currently in the midst of a five-year strategic plan with a goal to double revenue within that time frame.

Over the years, recessions and cutbacks have changed how companies approach charitable donations throughout many different markets. "As the industry goes through its roller coaster, so does Friends of We Care. But the one thing this industry has not done is let us down—they continue to support us as best as they can," he says. "We've had continual growth over the last five years, which is unbelievable when you consider all the different challenges this industry has gone through and continues to face. They still find the time to give back when they can and make a difference for the kids."

As companies amalgamate and budgets shift, the organization also had to re-examine its recruiting strategies to spread the same amount of volunteer hours across more people. "Where you would have had three companies potentially supporting you, now you're down to one. Every time that happens, you have to re-evaluate, you have to make sure you get to the right people and maintain those relationships," says Collins. "Companies are working smarter with smaller resources, and we need to be respectful of the time that volunteers can give so they don't walk away feeling drained."

In addition to a fluctuating economic playing field, a shifting landscape of legislation and perceptions of people with disabilities have made an impact on Friends of We Care's outlook through the years. "There are more opportunities these days because we're reducing the number of barriers and restrictions that kids when I was 12 might have faced," says Collins. "The industry is becoming more responsive and respectful of it. I would like to think that foodservice companies will be able to use the services of some of these campers coming into our industry—whether it be chefs or general managers or other roles—in the future."

It's this opportunity to change a child's life that is one of the central tenets of the Friends of We Care philosophy. One of Collins' favourite tasks is conducting the interviews with potential attendees of the camp (whose alumni include Paralympians and Juilliard graduates) and witnessing the change that come over the children through their participation in the program. "The first interview, the child hardly says a word, but by the end of their two-year term, they could be prime minister," he says, smiling. "Their confidence level and their abilities just shoot through the moon."



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Collins views his own career path as the perfect example of the possibilities inherent in Easter Seals and Friends of We Care. "Because of my drive and desire to succeed, I was given the opportunity to do so," he says. "If I can give one kid the same opportunities I was given as a child, my ultimate dream keeps going forward. That's what drives me every day I wake up, because I know those opportunities are there."

Comments

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Marsha Hall

Congratulations Kevin, it is a pleasure working with you and your team. We will continue to strive to work towards your goal to support this great cause. All the best from the Edmonton office of International Pacific Sales Marsha

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