

East Fishkill

Living

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THE
Leonardos
Wishes Granted



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Photo by Louisa Vilardi

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By Jeanne Cotroneo Darrow

Photos by Louisa Vilardi



Family is at the heart of everything the Leonardos do, from sports and travel to supporting Make-A-Wish.

The moment the envelope lands in his lap, the boy freezes. He glances at his parents, then back at the bright blue envelope. Lisa Leonardo leans in. “Go ahead,” she says. “Open it.”

Inside is the news he’s been wishing for: he’s going to meet the Dallas Cowboys. His parents wipe their eyes, and Lisa feels the same spark she’s experienced with every wish she’s helped grant. “That smile,” she says later, “is exactly why I do this.”

Make-A-Wish’s mission is simple but powerful: to create life-changing wishes for children with critical illnesses. From vacations to celebrity meet-and-greets, each wish offers joy and hope during an unimaginably difficult time. For Lisa, those moments are the heart of her volunteer work. “I want to give as much as I can in a kind or helpful way,” she says.

MAKING HER WAY TO MAKE-A-WISH

Working with children is what really sparked her interest. “For many wish kids, the experience gives them something exciting and magical to focus on instead of their illness, treatments, or hospital stays,” she explains. “You’re not just giving them a fun day—you’re giving them a reason to dream big again.”

After reading about the Hudson Valley chapter, she applied. She then completed training, interviews, and a background check. “It took a while to get there,” she says, “but once I was approved, I started right away.”

Her first assignments came in early 2019. The role suited her naturally—being the person who could listen without a medical chart in hand. She's now been part of granting about 15 wishes. Some come together quickly; others take years. The Cowboys fan whose wish Lisa revealed went to a game, toured the locker room, met the players, got autographs, and was named an honorary coach. For another young boy dreaming of attending a PGA tournament, "we're going on three years of planning so he can meet a specific player," she says.

There are heartbreaking moments, too. One five-year-old, when asked what she wanted, said quietly, "No more hospitals." Lisa explained that hospitals help heal, but the child's words stayed with her. "She'd already had five brain surgeries," Lisa says. "It broke my heart."

Sometimes, the children surprise everyone. A seven-year-old boy declined a wish for himself, asking instead for the money to go to the children's hospital. "What a selfless thing for a seven-year-old to do," Lisa says. "We presented a big check to the hospital, and it made him so happy."

Lisa keeps in touch with many of the families. One boy, Chase, became a regular part of her life. When his mom shared the news that he was cancer-free, Lisa celebrated by taking Chase and her son Joey out for ice cream. "It's those connections," she says, "that make this more than just a one-time thing."

Lisa's husband Mike and their two children have each found their own way to contribute. Ella, 13, ran a "Lemonade for Wishes" stand with her friends last summer, raising more than \$1,300 for the organization. She became the face of the campaign, featured in Hudson Valley chapter materials. "It's fun, and it feels good to do something nice," says Ella.

Like with Chase, Joey, 11, has attended wish reveals and befriended wish kids, joining in on playdates and celebrations.

A CREATIVE CAREER

Despite being raised by piano proprietors (her father is Jon Vincitore), Lisa was drawn to art rather than music. "I loved drawing and always wanted to be a fashion designer," says Lisa, who used to cut up Barbie dresses and piece together paper dolls. As a teen, she worked multiple jobs, including decorating cakes at a local bakery and altering tuxedos at Sossi Formals.

She studied fashion at SUNY Oneonta, where she met Mike, and took an internship with designer John Varvatos in her last semester. The decision paid off—she was hired right after graduation and went on to work for major American brands,

Volunteering has become a family tradition, with Joey and Ella proudly joining their mom's efforts to bring joy to wish families.



including Nautica and Calvin Klein, before joining Ralph Lauren nearly a decade ago.

As the director of design and merchandising for Ralph Lauren's licensed sleepwear and underwear lines, her role combines innovation and logistics, leading creative direction, design, product development, and merchandising for the global lifestyle brand. She attends photo shoots, curating looks and ensuring models are styled to reflect the Polo vision, and contributes to New York Fashion Week, the U.S. Open, the Olympics, and New York Yankee collaborations. Lisa participates in student mentorship programs and fashion shows at colleges including Parsons, Syracuse, and Pratt University. Coincidentally, Ralph Lauren has a significant partnership with Make-A-Wish America and donates a portion of event sales to the organization.

Lisa's office in their East Fishkill home—purchased in 2017 after living in Manhattan, Brooklyn, and on Long Island—reflects both her professional and artistic sides, with design boards for upcoming

seasons alongside pieces of her artwork. "I love that I can work from home—it means I can be here for my family and still do the work I love."

She is grateful to travel the world, including annual trips to factories in India, Thailand, Vietnam, and Japan plus shopping trips to Italy, Paris, and London. "Travel has inspired my designs, broadened my perspective, and nurtured my passion for exploring culture," says Lisa.

PORTUGUESE TRADITIONS

Mike grew up in Long Island's close-knit Portuguese community, spending summers in Portugal and playing hockey and soccer (his father was a semi-pro player). He trained as a teacher but joined the family business. He later excelled in heavy civil construction management as a member of a local laborers' union. Today, he's a field superintendent for a large infrastructure project in Hoboken that will add new train tunnels under the Hudson River. Despite the long commute, he still finds time to play men's soccer (with the Germania Club) and softball locally. Sports helped the family build friendships after moving to East Fishkill.

Ella is a driven middle schooler, balancing academics with playing soccer on a nationally ranked team and New York Elite club volleyball. An honors student on her way to becoming a Junior National Honor Society member, she hopes to become an orthodontist one day. She enjoys going paddleboarding with her mom.

continued on page 14



Partners in life and in giving back, Lisa and Mike balance busy careers with raising their children in East Fishkill.

Joey is an energetic and social sixth-grader who likes writing and playing soccer, basketball, and baseball, as well as spending time with friends on his electronics. He shows a natural kindness toward younger children. "Maybe I'll work for Make-A-Wish one day," he says.

The family vacations in Vero Beach, Fla., where Lisa spent summers with her family, and in Portugal, where Mike's family has a home. Portugal, the kids' first European trip, will become a summer tradition with grandparents—echoing Mike's own childhood.

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

The Hudson Valley Make-A-Wish office is lean and counts on volunteers like Lisa, a mentor to new wish-granters, to make everything possible. "There are many ways to help and support—you can volunteer at events, join a walk—and it doesn't have to be a huge time commitment."

Some wishes will come together quickly; others will take years. But each one will matter. "It's not just about the wish," says Lisa. "It's about giving these children a reason to smile and a precious memory to hold onto during a time when happiness can be rare. It's uplifting, humbling, and reminds us of the resilience we all carry within."

For more information or to volunteer with Make-A-Wish, visit wish.org. ♦

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