

Life Is Beautiful

A hospital-ward volunteer is devoted to an organization that helps sick children and their families. BY ELISE CORONEOS

When Joseph Weilgus began working on an undergraduate accounting degree at Manhattan's Yeshiva University in the mid-1990s, he had little idea that a big part of his time over the next few years would be spent in a clown suit. But one day, while visiting a hospitalized child he knew, Weilgus decided he wanted to do something to try to lift the spirits of all the children on the ward. So he came back — and made a habit of coming back — as a visiting jester.

Donning a clown suit satisfied Weilgus for a while, but after a time he was struck by the persistently unmet needs of young patients and their families. He noticed that sick children fell behind in school, for instance, and had little opportunity for recreational and social activities. Weilgus says he knew there must be other people like him who would jump at a chance to make a difference in the lives of these children. So he temporarily set aside the red nose and oversize shoes and got to work matching family members, friends and classmates with hospitalized kids.

“One day I was running between accounting classes and I realized I had ten groups of people at ten different hospitals at that given moment,” says Weilgus, 31, now the chief executive officer of New Legacy Capital, a \$100 million New York-based fund of hedge funds. “I thought that if a simple accounting student can do this, people much more creative can do much more.”

Such were the origins of Project Sunshine, an organization that today has a \$1.8 million annual budget supporting more than 10,000 volunteers in 75 cities in the U.S., as well as in satellite sites in Canada, China, Israel, Kenya and Puerto Rico. Project Sunshine's ten-member professional staff in New York coordinates some 3,000 programs that cater to the educational, recreational and social needs of children in hospitals and other medical facilities. The organization's core mission is to help volunteers improve the quality of life of sick kids and their families.

How volunteers participate depends on what skills they bring to the program. They can tutor and mentor, teach arts, crafts and cooking or be a book buddy. The organization sponsors minispas for mothers and fathers of patients by turning hospital conference rooms and play areas into relaxation zones. The Kenyan chapter of the group, founded in January 2006, is running a pilot program in partnership with the New York University School of Medicine's Center for AIDS Research to help

more than 1,000 children in Mombasa who are living with HIV/AIDS.

Weilgus challenges volunteers to look at their Sunshine experience as an investment in a child. “Imagine if you could take this difficult time and despite its challenges get a child more excited about reading, or even see them become accelerated compared to their peers,” says Weilgus, who still occasionally puts on his clown outfit and visits hospitals.

These days he spends most of his Project Sunshine time raising money and setting up partnerships with corporate sponsors. But Weilgus notes that the heart of the program is its volunteers. “I get feedback from



hedge fund people, and I can tell when I hear their voices that they are experiencing feelings they have not felt before,” he explains. “It is not just the kids we help, it is also the volunteers — because their lives are changed, too, just like mine was.”

Joseph Weilgus, founder of Project Sunshine, still works hands-on with some of the organization's beneficiaries.

For more information, visit www.projectsunshine.org.