

One simple wish

When a Woodbury teen's medical odyssey earned him a Make-A-Wish gift, he chose something he could share forever with his family and friends.

By Molly Guthrey

Drew Macke was in the hospital — again — when his mom finally received some good news.

"We were in New York for four weeks for a really big surgery," said Holly Macke of Woodbury. "The Ronald McDonald House was pushing me to apply for Make-A-Wish. I said, 'I don't have a sick kid.' They said, 'If you're staying here, you qualify.'"

Mostly, she was staying at her teenage son's hospital bedside.

"At the time, Drew was in the pediatric intensive care unit and there was so much happening," Macke said.

Perhaps this was why Macke agreed to begin the application process: Make-A-Wish is a nonprofit organization that grants the wishes of children with life-threatening medical conditions and, in the process, infuses each child — along with their families and their communities — with hope, strength and joy.

It was just what the doctor ordered — literally.

"Drew's doctor filled out the paperwork, I didn't have to do much, which was good, considering I had a kid in the ICU," Macke said.

A HOSPITALIZED CHILDHOOD

Andrew "Drew" Macke has grown up in hospitals.

Drew, the son of Holly and Rich Macke, was born with a number of complex, ongoing medical issues — collectively known as VATER association — that affect everything from his spine to his stomach to his feet.

"He's now had 60 medical procedures and

surgeries in 15 years," said his mom. "We've been at hospitals from Colorado to New York to Ohio to Minnesota."

Drew has a lot to miss when he's away: His mom or his dad (usually only one parent can travel with him); his siblings (Abby, 12, and Luke, 8); the cat and the dog; his friends, school, sports; his own bed; his life. Even if he's hospitalized locally, it's not ideal for a high school freshman.

"Right now, he's on week seven of missing school," said Macke at the end of April. "He had surgery in March in Columbus, Ohio. We had just gotten home when he had to go back into the hospital at St. Paul Children's because of a bunch of complications."

"THEY CAME WITH BALLOONS"

In May 2014, about a month after the New York hospitalization, Macke's phone rang.

It was someone from Make-A-Wish Minnesota: Drew's application had been approved.

"I had never told Drew or my husband about applying," Macke said. "I had almost forgotten about it — I never thought it would actually happen."

It actually did.

She told her husband, but not her son. She left that to the wish granters, Marsha Sampson and Mary Kay Libra, Make-A-Wish volunteers who showed up at the family's door. "He was a little overwhelmed," said Sampson.

"They came with balloons," said Macke. "I asked him, 'Has your mom told you?'" Sampson said. "He said, 'No.'"



PHOTOS BY MOLLY GUTHREY

ONE SIMPLE WISH, 3K>

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CONTINUED FROM 1K

> One simple wish

“They showed him books, filled with ideas for wishes,” said Macke.

Children’s wishes can usually be categorized four ways, said Sampson: A wish to go somewhere (for example, Disney World); a wish to be something (a police officer for a day); a wish to meet someone (a celebrity); a wish to have something (a computer or shopping spree).

“After we presented him with the options, we asked him, ‘What do you think you want?’” Sampson said.

He already knew.

‘THAT KIND OF HEART’

“He wanted a backyard hangout space,” Macke said. “When he can be, he’s a homebody.

“He wanted a space that everybody, his friends and his family, could enjoy, because he just has that kind of heart.”

As it was, the family didn’t spend much time in their yard, even when they were fortunate enough to all be at home.

“We had just lived there three years,” Macke said. “It was a new build, with a basic, small cement patio. Basic landscape. Nothing great. Normal. Nothing you’d ever sit out there and enjoy. Really sunny. Very sloped.”

Drew envisioned an outdoor room, a gathering place centered on an outdoor fireplace, something the family could not have invested in with their ongoing travel and medical expenses.

Drew’s wish wasn’t typical.

“We get wishes for a playhouse or a swing set, things like that, but what Drew asked for was definitely unique and not something we usually come across,” said Helen Ng, director of marketing and communications for Make-A-Wish Minnesota.

A DREAM CONTRACTOR

Drew’s wish got fast-tracked thanks to a family friend.

“My friend Stacey and I walk together a lot of mornings,” Macke said. “We were out walking that spring, the morning after I found out that Andrew had been selected for Make-A-Wish. She asked me, ‘What’s his wish?’”

After Macke told her, Stacey went home and told her husband.

Did we mention? Stacey’s husband, Jason Fabio, is the president and owner of Ispiri, a full-service design, build and remodeling company in Woodbury.

“She called me after we got back from our walk,” Macke said. “She told me she shared Drew’s wish with Jason. He was really touched by it. She said, ‘Where does Jason sign up? How can he be a part of this?’ I gave her the contact for my Make-A-Wish lady and from there, things started flying.”

“WE BOTH CRIED”

“The Make-A-Wish lady was like, ‘We already have someone who wants to head

this? This isn’t how it works!’” Macke said. Others signed up, too.

“Apparently, Jason wrote this amazing, heartfelt letter to the other contractors that got everyone committed,” said Macke.

The letter said, in part: “In spite of all his struggles, Drew has only one wish. He simply wants a backyard space where he can spend more time with his friends and family. His wish includes a backyard fireplace, patio, pergola and surrounding landscaping. When I heard of his request I contacted the Make-A-Wish Foundation to see how I could help. They put me in charge of the project.

“Ispiri as a company and our vendors as a community are coming together to support Drew and his family with their ongoing journey by helping his wish come true. Please see the attached plans and let me know if I can count on you and your company to make a difference in Drew’s life.”

Fabio could count on Ami Johannson, who is now a landscape designer and project manager in the newly formed landscape division of Ispiri, but at the time was a freelance landscape designer.

“Jason called me and said, ‘Ami, I’ve got a project,’” Johannson said. “He told me it was through Make-A-Wish. He described the family and the boy and his health challenges. When Jason and I were on the phone, we both cried. I just said, ‘I’m in. Let’s do this.’”

For Johannson, the tears fell over the boy’s mature yet simple wish.

“I think I was touched because it’s something most of us take for granted,” she said. “His wish was to be at home, with friends and family, gathered around a fire.”

When the knock came on Drew’s door again, it was to tell him his wish was granted. This time, Fabio and Johannson came, too. Drew’s wish was officially under construction.

VISIONS OF MARSHMALLOWS

“As a landscape designer, you typically meet with the homeowner and talk about the project, its scope and the site challenges,” Johannson said. “But this time, my client was a teenage boy.”

The boy had a vision, though, and it centered on an outdoor fireplace.

“He wanted to be able to sit around and roast marshmallows,” Johannson said. “He wanted to be able to use the yard in the winter as well as the summer, for their sledding parties.”

For this job, Johannson was a fundraiser as well as a designer.

“Make-A-Wish had a minimal budget that covered the materials we weren’t able to get donated,” Johannson said. “So I started making calls to different vendors.”

It certainly took a village to build this wish.

Besides Ispiri and Johannson, the volunteers and donors included Anchor Block

Company, Custom One Painting, EdgeTech Systems, First Class Concrete, Cedar View Electric, Gertens, Dan Grundner of Greener Side Irrigation and Landscaping, Jirik Sod Farm, Solid Construction and Stone Crafters.

“That was why the vendors were so important — so much of the actual value of the materials and labor were donated,” Johannson said. “We used the Make-A-Wish contribution on the little materials that we couldn’t get donated; small, necessary items. Most of the major materials and all the labor was donated.

“The pavers, everything with the fireplace, irrigation, landscape install labor was



donated, sod and labor was donated, pergola labor was donated, painting was donated, electronics were donated and installed, electrician labor,” Johannson said. “We could not have done it without the donations. Greener Side Landscape — Dan Grundner — was the one who did the patio, landscape, lighting, irrigation, and built the form for the fireplace. He has the biggest heart.”

Johannson did a lot of juggling, too, as the project coordinator.

“It took more coordinating than a normal site because these were volunteers,” she said. “So much of it was done after hours.”

Drew did his part, too.

“He always made sure the cooler was stocked with Powerade and Gatorade for the volunteers,” Macke said. “If he missed anything because he wasn’t feeling well, he made sure I took pictures of the progress.”

Construction started in July and wrapped up by the end of August.

“To see the amount of energy that Ispiri and Ami and everyone on board brought to this was astonishing,” Sampson said. “It morphed into a wonderful, wonderful proj-

ect.”

Afterward, the family — with some help from Make-A-Wish, friends and their church — hosted a thank-you party for everyone involved. Drew also wrote Johannson a thank-you note. “I am so amazed by the final product of the wish,” he wrote.

“I THOUGHT I COULD HAVE THIS FOREVER”

On a recent spring evening, a tuxedo cat meowed on the front porch of Drew’s two-story home in the Stonemill Farms development of Woodbury. In the driveway, his little brother was shooting hoops with a friend. Out back, on the big, grassy hill that slopes down to the house, Drew’s sister was throwing a tennis ball to their cocker spaniel.

And Drew?

He was in pain, but he was watching his dad build a fire; he was smiling.

He was also talking about the two backup wishes he had made — in case this, his No. 1 choice, hadn’t been possible. His second choice was an indoor gaming room; his third choice, a Disney cruise.

“I like this better,” he said. “Unlike a cruise, I thought I could have this forever — and something my family and friends could use all the time, too.”

A boy turning down a gaming room, though?

“Well,” he said, “I thought I’d not only use it more than a game room, but I’d enjoy it more. The aspect of being outside.”

“In the winter, we sled down the hill and then have a fire going,” he said as he lounged in the corner of the ivory-and-taupe outdoor sectional that his mother found online.

Above him, a massive pergola gives the spot definition and shade. A ceiling fan built into the pergola will keep the air moving even on those sticky days of the approaching summer.

Now, he said, “I’ll do my homework out here.”

The spot is also wired for when homework is completed.

“We sit out here and watch TV,” he said.

His mother smiles as she stands on the paver patio.

“He just got out of the hospital,” she said. “But you know what he did before he was admitted? He hosted a nacho bar and candy buffet for 10 of his friends.

“They played yard games, had a fire going, sat out there listening to music,” Macke said. “He forgot that he wasn’t feeling good. As a parent, I was worried the whole time that he was overdoing it, but my husband said, ‘You’ve got to let him be.’ After everyone left, he was hunched over and he needed some pain meds. But he said, ‘It’s OK, Mom, it was so worth it.’ That was a Saturday night. On Monday, he was back in the hospital.”

Molly Guthrey, a Pioneer Press reporter and columnist, is a frequent contributor to Spaces, where this article originally was published in June/July 2015.

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