Stone's Buddies director is ready for move, expansion at Children's Hospital
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If your child battles a chronic or life-threatening illness and faces treatment at Women & Children's Hospital of Buffalo, chances are Joanne Koessler-Lana has your family on her radar screen through the hospital's Stone's Buddies.

As its director, Koessler-Lana has overseen the program since it first began 12 years ago.

Stone's Buddies will command an even stronger presence for families and their sick children on the fifth floor of the John R. Oishei Children's Hospital when it opens in November on the Buffalo Niagara Medical Campus.

From a meditative area, to a winter garden with windows and natural light, to handicapped-accessible vegetable gardens, soothing music and entertainment for the children, the Stone's Buddies program will have a defined niche in the new hospital.

The support program helps patients who struggle with special needs and feelings of isolation due to the nature of their chronic illness. It also is a support for their families struggling with the emotional and social issues that accompany chronic and life-threatening illnesses. A network of resources, support, friendship and fun for those children is a cornerstone of the program.

The program was founded in memory of Stone Fillipovich who was only 4 years old when he died of brain cancer.

"Our goal is to connect them with others in similar circumstances, give comfort and friendship when they are in the hospital and serve as a bridge between the patients and those in the community who want to help," Koessler-Lana said.

She spoke with The Buffalo News recently for a series of interviews about the new Children's Hospital leading up to its opening this fall.

Q: What is the most important benefit that this program offers patients and their families?

A: Friendship, support and activities, because a lot of these kids are not in school, and so they aren't necessarily part of a sports team. They don't get invited to birthday parties. So we have monthly activities. Sometimes we'll have a party in the cafeteria, or go to Fantasy Island, or a donated party suite at the Bandits ... Anything that anybody wants to do for the hospital, I'm happy to figure out how to make it happen ... The children really form a bond.

Q: How many children does Stone's Buddies help?

A: We have over 500 members and so everything is the members and their families. Some of them are aged out a little bit. Our patients go up to age 21 ... But we would never kick anyone out because they turned 21.
Q: You're starting a new program within Stone's Buddies for kids ages 13 and over. Tell me about that.

A: We don't have a name for it yet. It will focus on activities for kids that are 13 and above. When I first started Stone's Buddies, all the kids were so little. And now, it's 12 years later, and many are teenagers. We do get new kids. I've gotten to know all these kids and they're getting a little bored with these activities. When you're 16, 17, teenagers don't want to do some of the things so much. We're talking about bowling parties, maybe try to get a DJ. Some kids want to plan the whole thing so they can do things they're excited about doing, too. I have my little committee of teenagers that's working on this with me.

Q: Where are you going to be in Oishei?

A: We are going to be on the fifth floor. It's going to be a family floor. On that floor is the resource center, which is great for the parents. For my Stone's Buddies families, the meditation space is down there. I'm really excited about our big winter garden.

Q: What is the winter garden?

A: It's tons of natural light coming in – two stories, two whole walls of windows. It's this big, bright beautiful space. Part of it will be little sitting areas for families ... But the part I'm really excited about is along the one window it's going to be all vegetable gardens and they'll be handicapped-accessible so the kids can get in there. Technically, we can't eat the stuff that we grow. The biggest thing for me is I just want to teach them about gardening and healthy eating.

Q: What else will there be for the children?

A: We're also going to have music. We're going to have bird sounds and natural sounds. Up on the ceiling, we'll have a projector that shows stars or sun, or whatever. We're going to make it feel as much of an outside space as we possibly can. We don't have anything like that right now.

Q: How common is the Stone's Buddies program?

A: The Stone's Buddies program isn't really done in other hospitals. I don't know of any other hospital that does it. I get calls from different hospitals and from students wanting to do papers on it. I'm going to Richmond, Virginia, Children's (Hospital) because they want to start a program like this ... It's the only one that I know of that really covers the whole broad spectrum and creates a support system for all the parents.

Q: What's your staff like?

A: It's really just me, and I usually have an intern. I work with the patients one on one. My volunteers are typically the parents. We get so many donations. The community is so kind.

Q: Anything else new at Oishei?

A: We will have the New Era pavilion. We've really outgrown the cafeteria. The cafeteria is not really set up for programs ... We'll have a big, wide open space where we can have events and kids in wheelchairs will be able to get around so much more easily.
Q: What is the most difficult thing helping families cope with challenges that they sometimes have absolutely no control over?

A: It's hard for the families to watch when the other families lose children. But it is so nice to have them there to help each other. I try to do what I can to connect them all. It's nice to have them help each other. I have at least 20 families who are still a part of the program who have lost kids that continue to come to events with their other kids. They still have them as a nice source of support.