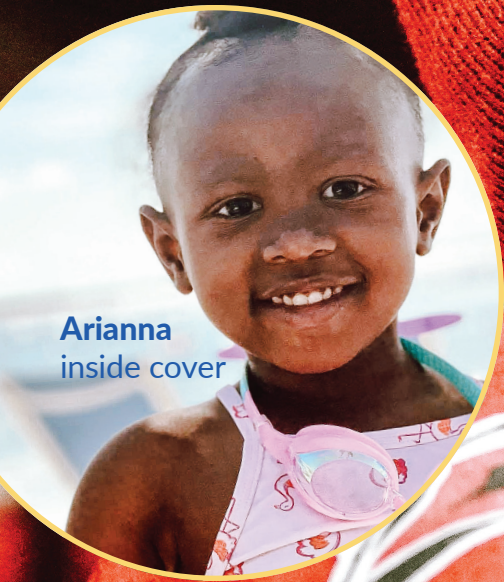


*Serving the  
Triangle to  
the Coast.*

ANNUAL REPORT  
FISCAL YEAR 2023

# The power of a *wish*



**Arianna**  
inside cover

**JoJo**  
page 6

**Make-A-Wish®**  
EASTERN NORTH CAROLINA



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*I wish to have a hands-on animal experience in Florida*

Arianna, 5  
Wake County cancer

# Letter from our *team*

At Make-A-Wish Eastern North Carolina, the most important responsibility we have is delivering our mission to the families we serve. We take immense pride in creating a memorable and meaningful wish experience for every eligible child in our local community – and it is a full team effort! We see children wish **to go** on fantastic trips. **To meet** a popular celebrity. **To have** a dream item. **To become** a fantasy character or experience a future career. Or **to give back** in a way that is important to them.

When a wish comes true, it sparks a feeling of joy – much like the feeling of a hard-earned victory, scoring a game-winning goal, or finally mastering a trick.

This year, we grieved the losses of several special members of our wish community while also logging many victories that were cause for celebration. Through it all, we felt inspired by our wish community. Parents coaching children through

surgery, and therapy. Each embracing their position, taking on their role with grace and compassion.

And just like our wish community comes together, our team does as well to find creative ways to play our parts. From planning the details of a wish to bringing partners together in fundraising efforts; from working with medical providers to sharing the impactful stories of our wish kids. We are all united on the same team, striving for the same goal: to reach every eligible child in eastern North Carolina with the **hope, strength, and joy** of a wish come true.

This year our community joined hands from the Triangle to the coast as volunteers, donors, staff, board members, corporate partners, wish alumni, and wish families teamed up to reach **180 children** with a wish come true. As we look back at those 180 life-changing wishes granted last year, we are inspired by the creativity, passion, and hope in each and every one. We celebrate each unique child

*“We are all united on the same team, striving for the same goal: to reach every eligible child in eastern North Carolina with the hope, strength, and joy of a wish come true.”*

their battle with critical illness. Doctors and medical teams calling the plays and formulating the action plans. Donors, partners, and volunteers rallying support. Siblings stepping up to take on additional duties or acting as the cheering section. Wish kids showing tremendous bravery trying new things through tests, treatments,

and their dreams. And we look ahead with excitement at the opportunity to reach more eligible children in the years to come.

It is truly an honor and a privilege to serve this mission in eastern North Carolina, and our team is committed to more. We are excited to continue to serve our wish children and



*I wish to go to Walt Disney World Resort*

Omi, 7  
Wake County lymphoma



families in such profound ways, and we can't wait to see what we achieve together in the next year.

The mission of Make-A-Wish is to grant wishes for children with critical illnesses, helping inspire them to look beyond their illness and have hope and joy for the future.

Together, this team will inspire more hope, spread more joy, and empower more children with strength in their fight against a critical illness.

With gratitude,

**The Staff and Board of Directors at Make-A-Wish Eastern North Carolina**



# Don't underestimate the *power of a wish*

A wish goes far beyond the tangible or physical. A trip to Walt Disney World Resort is not just a trip — it's a chance to remember what it's like to be a kid and experience magic. Meeting your favorite hockey star isn't just about shaking hands with a celebrity — it's a chance to feel important and seen and to know that you're more than your illness. A room makeover isn't just about fresh paint on the walls — it's a chance to create a haven as you undergo treatment and seek to heal.

This is the true power of a wish: **the hope that it inspires.**  
*Thank you for being a part of inspiring hope this past year.*

## MISSION

To create life-changing wishes for children with critical illnesses.

## VISION

To grant the wish of every eligible child in our chapter area.

## DESIRED OUTCOME

Make-A-Wish® shines a light of hope for children fighting critical illnesses when they need it most. A wish helps a child replace fear with confidence, sadness with joy, and anxiety with hope.

# 37 years of *resilience*

Just like being a part of a sports team, this work takes **resilience**. It requires **strength** and **tenacity**. It often necessitates **perseverance**, **endurance**, and **hope** against all odds. For more than 37 years, we've drawn on the strength of our wish families and leaned on the support of our community to make wishes come true.

Since our inception in 1986, Make-A-Wish Eastern North Carolina has served all medically eligible children who reside in the 49-county chapter area east of the Orange/Alamance county line, from the **Triangle** to **Greenville and the Outer Banks** to the **Coastal Region**. Our goal is to reach **every eligible child** in our chapter area and grant their wish.

To date, the organization has granted more than **4,412 wishes**, at **zero cost to the families we serve**. We operate solely through the generous donations of individuals, corporations, organizations, and foundations, and with the help of more than **250 volunteers**, including our Board of Directors. **Thank you for supporting us as we cheer on our wish families!**

**To be eligible to receive a wish, the child:** 1) must be diagnosed with a critical illness, i.e., a progressive, degenerative, or malignant condition that is placing the child's life in jeopardy; 2) must be older than 2½ years and younger than 18; and 3) has not received a previous wish from Make-A-Wish or another wish-granting organization.

# FY2023 impact

Organization total wishes granted: **4,412**

Total wishes granted in FY2023: **180**

The average cost of a wish: **\$7,500**

Total number of volunteers: **250+**



*I wish to make a wish in a volcano*

Harrison, 10  
 Durham County  
 nervous system disorder





“There has never been a better day in Joseph’s life.”

— JoJo’s mom, Ann

*I wish to meet Sebastian Aho and the Carolina Hurricanes*

JoJo, 5  
Make-A-Wish Alaska & Washington chapter cancer

# The power of a *wish*

*JoJo’s wish to meet Sebastian Aho and the Carolina Hurricanes.*

Since JoJo was a baby, hockey has been in his life. From the time he could walk, he’s played the game. He loves hockey so much that his family temporarily converted their living room into a hockey rink.

“Simply put, he’s obsessed,” said his mom, Ann. “He wants to play at every possible opportunity.”

Hockey has always been a staple in their house. Games and highlights steadily stream on their television screens — and their team has always been the Carolina Hurricanes. They didn’t think they could be bigger fans, but then JoJo’s wish was granted, and now their adoration for the team has a new, deeper meaning.

Only a couple weeks before JoJo’s second birthday, he received his first Hurricanes jersey. That’s around the same time their family’s world turned upside down.

JoJo fell and hit his head, so his parents took him to the pediatrician. He was fatigued and had a fever. They ran some blood work and waited for the results.

That’s when they received a devastating call. “We knew it wasn’t good at that point,” said JoJo’s father. “They told us to not waste any more time and go straight to Seattle Children’s.”

He was admitted immediately. Hours later, they had an answer: **it was cancer.**

“It was like being in a wind tunnel,” said Ann. “You see and hear things happening around you, but it doesn’t register. It was a blur.”

While in the hospital, **hockey was JoJo’s joy.** He’d watch the Hurricanes and talk about their favorite players. It was a happy distraction.

When they found out JoJo qualified for a wish, they talked to JoJo about what that meant. Thinking about what he could wish for was an injection of excitement into their arduous days.

JoJo wanted to meet his favorite player on the Hurricanes, **Sebastian Aho.** And so, when Make-A-Wish Alaska & Washington called back, they told their wish-granting volunteers what JoJo had decided.

Just like the Hurricanes are a team, **all of us at Make-A-Wish are a team.** That’s why when we heard JoJo from Washington wanted to meet the Hurricanes, we partnered with their chapter to make it happen!

From that day forward, when JoJo saw Aho on the television, he could imagine taking the ice with him by his side. When JoJo’s wish day finally arrived, **it was a dream come true.**

JoJo’s mom said his wish trip was the best thing to ever happen to JoJo. He got to meet his favorite hockey player and was treated to a VIP experience by the Hurricanes. Every interaction was so special.

“The Hurricanes were so generous with their time. We couldn’t have dreamed it up. It so far exceeded our expectations,” said Ann.

JoJo didn’t just get to meet his favorite player — **he was a Hurricane for the day.** He got to tour the locker room, hang out with the players, and play on the ice. The next day, he attended a game with his family and was a lucky charm for the Hurricanes who went on to win the game.

“I really don’t know how to say thank you. We are all beyond grateful. Truly, words do not exist,” Ann said. “It’s something he will never forget,” she continued. “He won’t remember the pokes or the port, but he’s going to remember that Make-A-Wish helped him meet Aho, and they made his wish come true.”

JoJo’s wish was a celebration for all he’s overcome, and a chance for his family to put cancer behind them.

“We’re on a new trajectory,” said JoJo’s father. “We have happier, better days ahead.”

Now, when JoJo sees Aho on television, he cheers with delight and says, **“That’s my buddy.”**

“The wish was a chance for our whole family to take a collective breath,” said Ann. “We have been on high alert since cancer came into our lives, but we took this opportunity to rest and truly enjoy ourselves. There are no words to express our gratitude.”



# Our *wins* from 2023

*We're doing a victory dance!*

## We made tremendous progress on our DEI efforts.

In 2020, Make-A-Wish Eastern North Carolina began work to assess our effectiveness in meeting the widespread needs of our wish community by launching an **internal diversity, equity, and inclusion committee**. Our vision is to grant the wish of **every** eligible child residing in our 49-county chapter area. We strive to serve our community with compassion, equity, and integrity while acknowledging the diversity of race, gender, language, geography, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, religion, and personal beliefs of the community as a whole.

We continuously examine how we can do better in partnership with our diverse wish families, board, staff, volunteers, donors, and corporate supporters. To this end, this year our chapter participated in quarterly staff educational opportunities, focused updates on our website and social media practices to always include accessibility actions, and served **38** Spanish-speaking wish families — like 16-year-old Berenice's family! — in their preferred language!

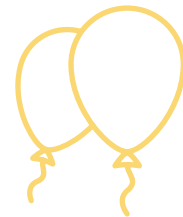
*I wish to go to Hawaii*

**Berenice, 16**  
Wake County cancer



*I wish to have a gaming room makeover*

**Elvis, 17**  
Wake County cancer



## We had a very successful Wish Ball with a special twist.

17-year-old wish kid Elvis was surprised on stage with his wish to have a gaming room makeover. As he attended the event, volunteers were hard at work transforming his room into a gamer's paradise. Plus, we returned to our pre-COVID fundraising levels, successfully raising **\$543,300!**

## We granted 180 wishes in 2023!

This incredible achievement would not have been possible without you.

## We published our first wish child book and paid tribute to author Ellena who lost her life to brain cancer.



When Ellena was just eight years old, she wrote an endearing story called *Coconut and Charles*. Fast forward eight years later, when Ellena turned 16 years old and was diagnosed with terminal brain cancer. Despite her devastating diagnosis, she had not forgotten her dream of becoming a published author. So, Make-A-Wish Eastern North Carolina helped that dream come true by helping Ellena get her book to an illustrator and publisher in the seven short weeks she had to live following her diagnosis.

*Coconut and Charles* was published after Ellena passed away, with our team and her family carrying the torch and celebrating her life with book release events to share it with the community. Ellena was determined to help find a cure and encourage children with the aggressive cancer that took her own life. A portion of funds from book sales go to the Ellena Vollmer Foundation.

*I wish to write and publish a children's book*

**Ellena, 16**  
Pasquotank County brain cancer



Scan this QR code to order your copy and help Ellena's legacy live on through her creativity and her words!



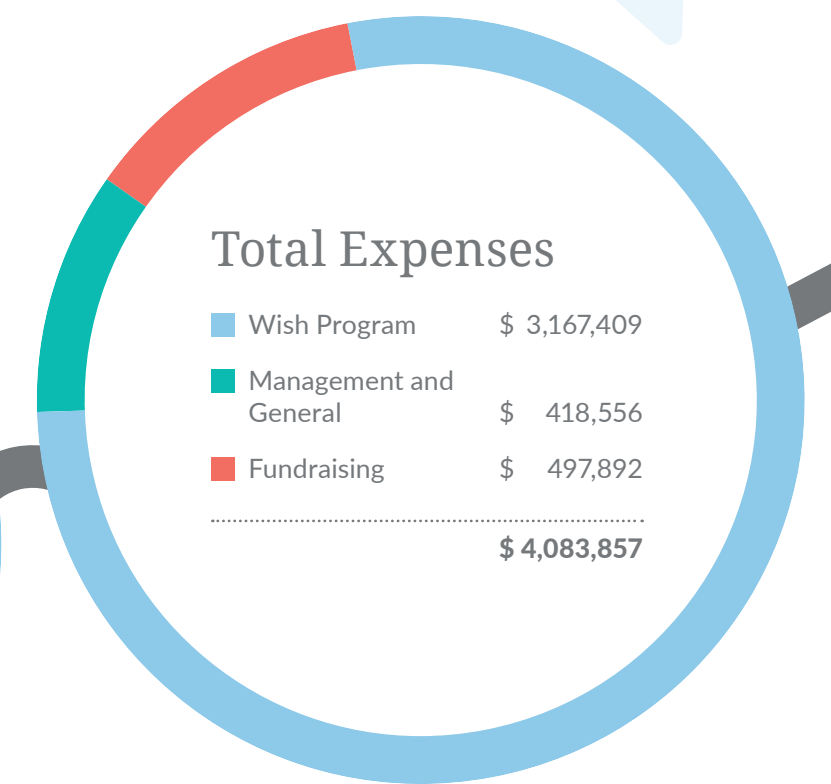
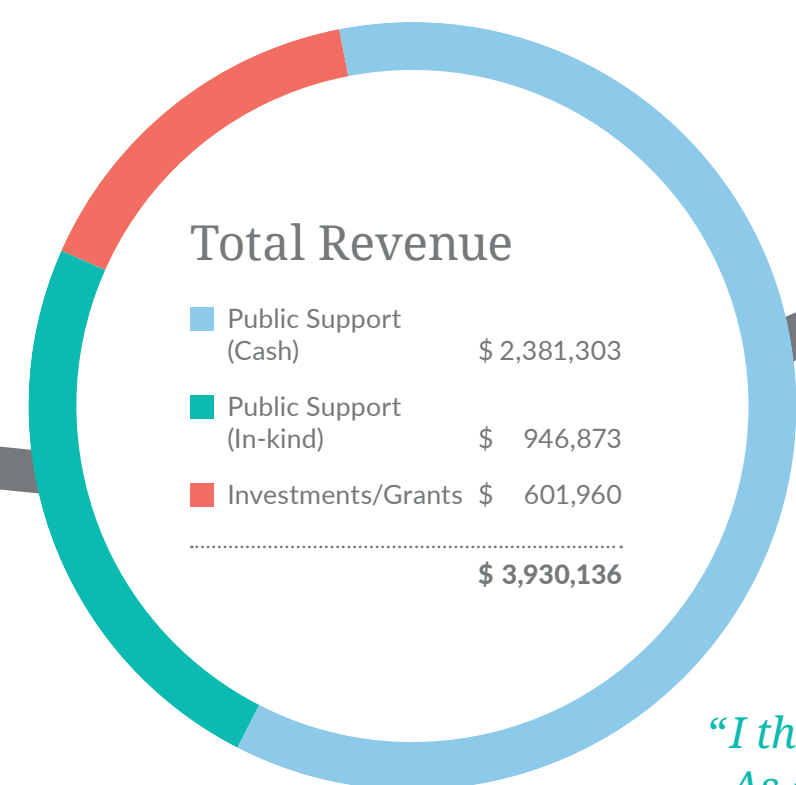


*I wish to have a custom outdoor man cave*

Manny, 15  
Wake County  
heart failure

# Your *generosity* gives families a shot at a *wish* come true

## OUR FY2023 FINANCES



*“I think I had as much fun as the kids did! As a dad, it helps me to know my daughter isn’t alone. She’s part of a community here with Make-A-Wish.” – Rick, wish dad*

## OUR FY2023 STATS

### Top 5 wish types

Walt Disney World® Resort	88
Shopping Spree	19
Domestic Travel	18
Hawaii Travel	12
Celebrity/Sporting Events	10

### Age range

2.5-5 years	14
6-8 years	44
9-11 years	34
12-14 years	28
15-17 years	31
18+ years	29

### Illness types

Cancer	48
Leukemia	37
Blood Disorder	17
Brain Tumor	14
Nervous System Disorder	14
Other	50



# There's no "I" in team

We know that our work would not be possible without the commitment, creativity, and generosity of countless donors, partners, volunteers, and champions of our work. We are humbled to have partnered with new supporters and to have continued relationships with existing partners. **You are all MVPs in our eyes.**

## COMMUNITY PARTNER SPOTLIGHT

# A full circle moment at UNC Kenan-Flagler

Professor Jim Kitchen has been leading his UNC Kenan-Flagler Business School's entrepreneurship and business planning class in helping to grant local wishes for more than eight years. The class and Professor Kitchen work on projects to create and sell a product to raise money for nonprofit organizations. In 2016, wish kid **Will Fickling** was the beneficiary of the class efforts, receiving his wish to attend the Maui Jim Invitational and see the Tar Heels play. Will visited the class

at the end of the semester, where he shared his medical journey and details of his wish experience.

Fast forward to the Fall 2022 semester when Professor Kitchen was greeted in class by a familiar face. **Will was now a student at UNC taking that very same class he visited years prior.**

"I showed up on day 1 [of the class] and said, 'Hey Professor Kitchen, I don't know if you remember me, but my name is Will Fickling. You granted my wish six years ago. The last time I was in here, I had a port in my chest, and I was receiving chemo every week,'" said Will.

To say Professor Kitchen was excited was an understatement: "I stopped whatever I was doing and wrapped my arms



Professor Kitchen and Will as a wish kid in 2016.

around him. It was such an honor to have him in my class," he said. "To be a wish child who is then going to embark on this whole other journey on the other side of generating profits for another wish child, it was just a beautiful thing."

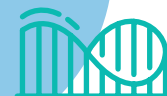
In 2022 the class again teamed up to help grant wishes, this year fundraising for wish kid Edison to have his wish to go to Walt Disney World Resort granted. **Just like Will, Edison visited the class and shared his story.** At the end of the semester-long project, the class collectively raised **\$85,000** — *the most in the history of the partnership* — bringing the eight-year total to **\$350,000!** We can't help but think Will's presence in the class — a testimony to the impact a wish can have on a life — was the motivation behind this record-setting amount raised.



Edison chats with Professor Kitchen and wish alumni Will!

**I wish to go to Walt Disney World Resort**

**Edison, 5 Wake County cancer**



*"There have been few times in my life that have been quite as impactful and meaningful as that with Will."* — Professor Jim Kitchen

## CORPORATE PARTNER SPOTLIGHT

# Zaxby's creates undeniable joy!

When corporate partners and consumers come together to grant wishes, it creates **undeniable joy** for everyone! Our regional partners at Zaxby's have shown their dedication to granting wishes over the past decade, culminating this year with a month-long partnership across the chapter territory. Through the years, various locations have hosted single night donation drives that inspired the regional area leadership teams to think bigger.

Led by the Guardian Food Services franchises, teams from 46 locations across eastern North Carolina participated in a month-long partnership, *30 Days of Wishes*, raising more than \$27,000. **In total, the eastern North Carolina Zaxby's locations have raised more than \$65,000 to help grant life-changing wishes for children with critical illnesses!**

**30 DAYS** of wishes



## NATIONAL PARTNERS



## LOCAL PARTNERS





# Wish *highlights*

A few more season bests you made possible.



*I wish to have a bedroom makeover*

Emily, 20  
Duplin County  
cancer

*I wish to go to Hawaii*

Gabrielle, 8  
Wake County  
blood disorder



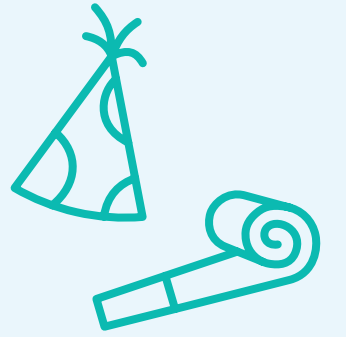
*“I chose a career in nursing because of the time I spent in hospitals and doctor’s offices. I want to help other kids like me. I wanted a new room so I can focus and study and achieve my goals.” – Emily*



*I wish to go on a train trip across the country*

Caleb, 14  
Cumberland County  
rare disease

# Looking ahead to a new season of granting *wishes*



As we close out this year, we once again thank you for being a critical part of our team. You make victories possible, and we cannot wait to see what lies in store for 2024. Here’s a sneak peek!

## OUR 2024 SCHEDULE OF EVENTS AND HAPPENINGS

### 1. Take the Trailblaze Challenge this May!

Hike 27.4 miles from Hanging Rock to Pilot Mountain while granting life-changing wishes.

### 2. Don’t miss our inaugural Wishmaker’s Gala on March 21, 2024, in Wilmington.

This unique collaborative dinner features renowned local chefs and can’t be missed!

### 3. We’ll grant our 4,500th wish in 2024!

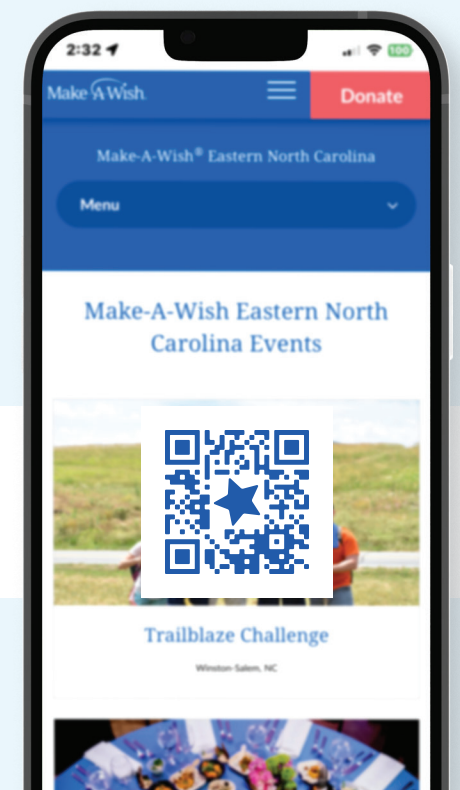
Connect with us now so you don’t miss the celebration.

### 4. Attend our annual Wish Ball event in August 2024.

Join the Raleigh community as we come together in our celebration of wishes.

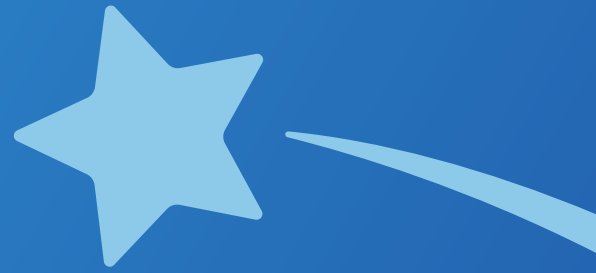
Your unwavering commitment and support over the years have changed the game for us and for countless wish families in our state. And to us, that’s pretty powerful. *Thank you.*

To be a part of one or ALL of these celebrations, head to [wish.org/eastnc/our-events](https://wish.org/eastnc/our-events) or scan the QR code.





# Our *roster*



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*“This is a big thing for kids that spend  
their lives in therapy. It was nice to have  
that week that we were just...a family.”*

— Amy, wish mom

**Make-A-Wish**<sup>®</sup>  
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