

# A Spark of *Hope*



Jayden  
pg 8

*Serving the Triangle  
to the Coast.*

ANNUAL REPORT  
FISCAL YEAR 2025

Make-A-Wish®  
EASTERN NORTH CAROLINA

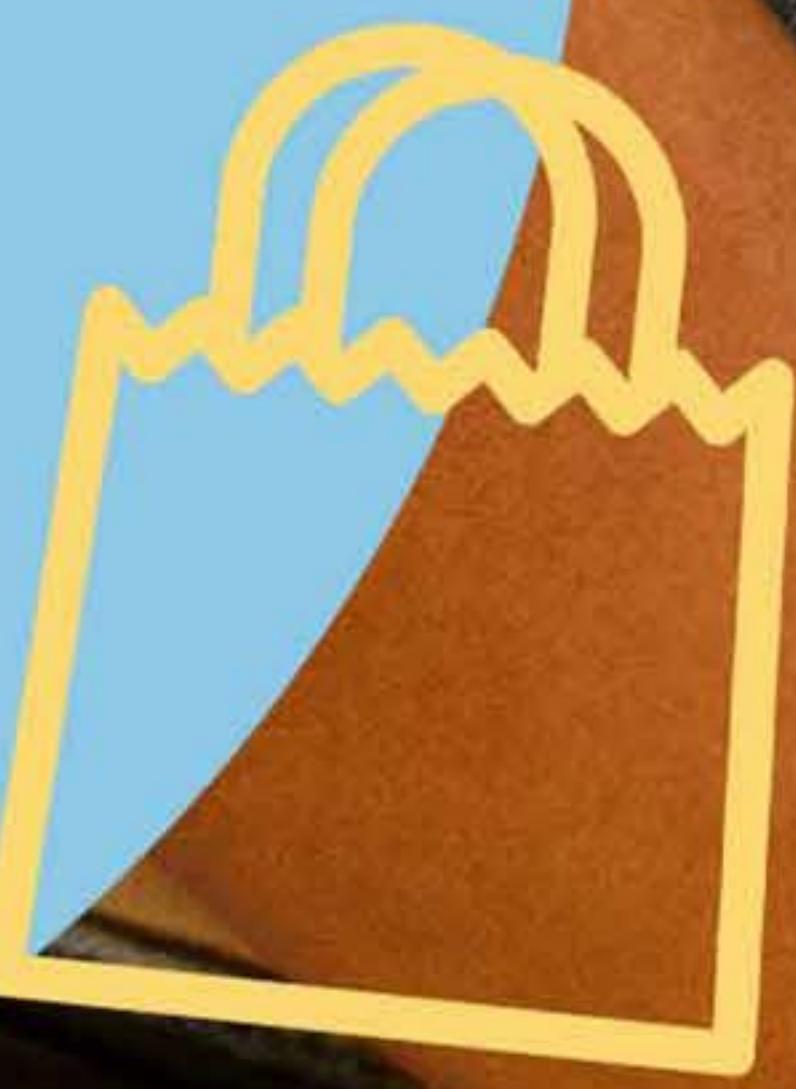
*I wish to have a shopping spree*

Jazmine, 12  
Wilson County  
blood disorder



*“It brought Jazmine the greatest joy, and she will never forget this experience. I will never forget this.”*

*-Leticia  
Jazmine’s Mom*



MakeWishesComeTrue.org

# A letter from our **CEO**

What an extraordinary year it has been for Make-A-Wish® Eastern North Carolina!

As I reflect on this past year—my first as CEO—I’m filled with immense gratitude and awe. Together, we made history: granting a record-breaking 230 local wishes and raising more funds than ever before to bring joy, strength, and hope to children battling critical illnesses across our 49 counties from the Triangle to the coast. Both the Wishmaker’s Gala in Wilmington and Wish Ball in Raleigh shattered records, showcasing the incredible heart and generosity of our eastern North Carolina wish community.

Behind every wish is a name, a story, and a moment of transformation, proof that each wish is not a last wish, but a lasting wish. Each wish granted is more than a milestone—it’s a lasting ripple of hope that touches entire families and communities. I know this not only as a leader, but as a member of a wish family myself. My cousin’s wish forever changed how I see the world and continues to remind me that our mission is deeply personal. For me, this work has always been about turning passion into purpose—about transforming compassion into action, and hope into something tangible.

This year, our team has made monumental strides in ensuring that no child waits too long for their wish to be granted. Following the pandemic, many high-cost travel wishes faced years-long delays—something we simply could not accept. By focusing our operations with both strategic excellence and heartfelt purpose, we cleared a significant portion of that backlog and reduced the typical wait time for a wish to the average 6–12 months.

***Our commitment is to run like a business, but with a big heart – efficient, accountable, and always centered on our mission.***

As we step into our 40th anniversary year, we do so with tremendous momentum and a milestone on the horizon—our 5,000th wish granted. This moment represents more than a number; it’s a testament to four decades of unwavering belief in the power of a wish and to our local communities that make it possible. Our vision remains clear: to reach every eligible child in the 49 counties we serve across eastern North Carolina and ensure each one experiences the life-changing power of a wish.



To our staff, volunteers, donors, partners, and our dedicated Board of Directors—thank you for believing in this mission and for helping make wishes a reality every day. Because of you, we’re not just granting wishes—we’re creating lasting hope and transformational impact.

With heartfelt gratitude,

*Mary Elizabeth Bennett*

**Mary Elizabeth Bennett**  
Chief Executive Officer  
Make-A-Wish® Eastern North Carolina

# Delivering on our mission

A wish is more than just one special moment. It's a spark that brings light and joy to children and families during the most difficult times of their lives. For every child facing a critical illness, a wish opens the door to laughter, love, and the chance to simply be a kid again. It reminds families that hope and happiness can always shine through.

The true power of a wish isn't the day on the cruise or at Disney World, it is the joy it creates and the hope it inspires. Each wish granted fills hearts with courage and strength that lasts long after the moment has passed. Thank you for helping make these incredible memories possible for children across eastern North Carolina 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

## BELIEF

A wish experience can transform the life of a child with a critical illness

## DESIRED OUTCOMES

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.

## The *Impact*

### Ada's Wish to go on a Disney Cruise

When Ada was diagnosed with cancer, her and her family's world changed in an instant. The diagnosis launched them into a whirlwind of fear, anxiety, and days when hope felt fragile and the future uncertain.

Then came a moment of relief and renewed hope: the opportunity to have her wish granted by Make-A-Wish Eastern North Carolina. Through her wish to go on a Disney Cruise, Ada found herself surrounded by sunshine, laughter, and her favorite Disney friends. She spent her days dancing on deck, exploring the beautiful island of Castaway Cay, and creating joyful memories with her family that will never fade. Each smile and each magical moment reminded them that even in the hardest moments, joy and hope can light the way forward.



*"We were together as a family when we went through her cancer, and we were together as a family celebrating on her wish."*

*-Ada's mom*

# FY25 *impact*

Organization  
wishes to date **4,854**

Total wishes  
granted in FY25 **230**

Average cost  
per wish **\$10,000**

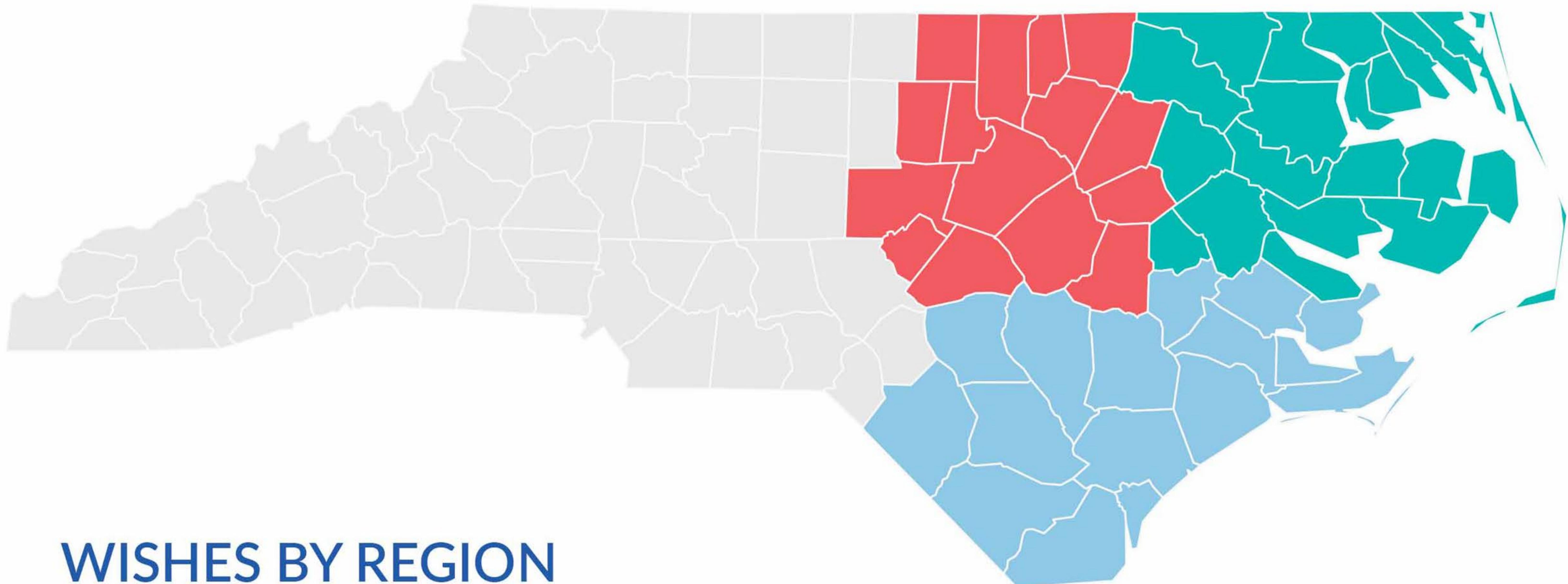
Total number of  
volunteers **130**

Wishes granted  
in their preferred  
language **19**



*I wish to go on a Disney Cruise*  
Ada, 18  
Pender County  
cancer

# Granting wishes across eastern N.C.



## WISHES BY REGION

Triangle.....	116
Coastal.....	67
Greenville/Outer Banks.....	47

This year marked an incredible milestone for Make-A-Wish Eastern North Carolina with 230 life-changing wishes granted. Each wish became a powerful reminder of what hope can do for children and their families. From the Triangle and Greenville to the Outer Banks and our Coastal regions, our community came together to create moments of joy,

strength and resilience for children and families across eastern North Carolina. For 39 years we have been dedicated to serving all medically eligible children who reside east of the Orange/Alamance county line. Since our founding in 1986, the organization has granted more than 4,800 wishes at zero cost to the families we serve. Our goal remains the same: to reach

every eligible child in our chapter area and grant their wish. With the dedication of our volunteers, staff, board of directors, and supporters across eastern North Carolina, we continue to turn moments of uncertainty into moments of magic, one wish at a time.

**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 2.5 years and younger than 18; and 3) has not received a previous wish from Make-A-Wish or another wish-granting organization

# A year of *hope*

*Celebrating a record breaking year of hope and joy*

## WE GRANTED MORE WISHES THAN EVER BEFORE

This year, Make-A-Wish Eastern North Carolina granted a record-breaking 230 wishes, the most in chapter history! This feat brings us closer than ever to our goal of granting a wish for every eligible child in eastern North Carolina. Ten-year-old Noah was just one of those children who was able to experience the true power of a wish in FY25. Noah traveled to Walt Disney World® for an adventure filled with laughter, excitement, and joy. As a huge Marvel fan, he was over the moon when he got to meet some of his favorite characters such as Captain America! From start to finish, this trip was more than a vacation, it was a time for Noah to be able to enjoy being a kid, and a chance to make memories that will last a lifetime.

***“Noah had the most fun in his life! He felt so special, because he'd never experienced anything like this before. It truly was amazing to see a constant smile on his face day in and day out.”***

-Amy  
Noah's mom



*I wish to go  
to Walt Disney  
World®*

Noah, 10  
Chatham County  
heart condition

## OUR RECORD BREAKING GALAS

### *Wish Ball:*

Our 2025 Disco themed Wish Ball raised a record breaking \$715,000! Throughout the night guests were able to enjoy music, food, and more while experiencing the true power of a wish. The highlight of the evening came when all of our wish kids in attendance came together on stage to celebrate!

### *Wishmaker's Gala:*

In Wilmington, our Wishmaker's gala, themed Around the World in Eighty Wishes, raised a record breaking \$480,000! Guests were treated to a night of culinary delights, live entertainment, and unforgettable moments of joy, including Aiden's wish to go to Walt Disney World being granted live on stage!



# A spark of *hope*

## *Jayden's wish to have a biomedical engineering bootcamp experience*

Jayden was a 13-year-old kid from Wake County, North Carolina who loved playing video games with his friends when his world was turned upside down. A regularly scheduled eye exam showed swelling in the nerves behind Jayden's eye. His eye doctor immediately sent them to Duke's neuro-ophthalmology department, where an MRI revealed the worst: a brain tumor.

That's when the whirlwind of treatment started. Jayden and his mother, Melissa, spent countless days in the hospital as he underwent surgeries and radiation.

"Before everything happened you're running around as a kid," said Jayden, "But then, you lose things. After all my surgeries I've lost a lot of stamina and energy. **As a kid you can just run around and be free, I don't have that luxury anymore.**"

Though his treatment is over, Jayden still lives with its effects, including hearing loss and partial facial paralysis, which left him unable to blink his left eye.

"It's been quite a journey for us," said Melissa. "We're still dealing with the aftermath. It's like a mourning, you're mourning your past life, and we still haven't recovered from that."

During long hospital stays, Jayden tried various medical devices to help protect his eye, but ultimately was left disappointed. Most patches simply covered the eye without keeping it closed, causing discomfort and increasing the risk of infection.

However, when Jayden learned he qualified for a wish, **it gave him a spark of hope during the seemingly unending late nights in a hospital room.** He spent every night brainstorming and discussing with his mom what his wish could be.

Ultimately, he decided on a wish that would not only help him, but help countless people like him. He wished to have a biomedical engineering and business bootcamp experience to create a new type of eye patch with the goal of bringing it to market.

"I've always wanted to help people," Jayden expressed. "I've never had an avenue toward that goal until now with Make-A-Wish."

On March 26, 2025, Jayden, now 17, arrived at The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill for a two-day experience hosted by the Lampe Joint Department of Biomedical Engineering at UNC-Chapel Hill and NC State. Dr. Devin Hubbard welcomed Jayden and his family, ready to

help bring his vision to life. "It's a dream come true," Jayden said.

Over the next two days, Jayden met with biomedical engineering and business students and professors. He walked through the entire design process— from identifying the problem and brainstorming solutions to building and testing a prototype.

At the end of the bootcamp, Jayden was able to try on the new eyepatch he helped create. "It's perfect," he said, beaming, as the room erupted in cheers. "It was brought to fruition in a way I never could have imagined."

He left the bootcamp experience with the prototype, new mentors, and an experience of a lifetime. "Hopefully I want to bring it to everyone," Jayden expressed. "I just want it to be a safe product and I want to bring it to everyone I can. Not just me."

As Jayden and his family continue to navigate the aftermath of his diagnosis, the wish experience gave them something invaluable: hope. "It's exciting because he's waited so long," Melissa said. "**He needs a win. You need a little something after all of this.**" Finally, Jayden was able to get his win.



*I wish to have a Biomedical  
Engineering Bootcamp Experience*

Jayden, 18

Wake County  
brain tumor



*I wish to go to Walt Disney World®*  
Cameron, 8  
Onslow County  
congenital heart disease

# Your generosity provides *hope and joy* for wish families

## OUR FY25 FINANCIALS



### REVENUE

■ Public Support (Cash)	<b>\$4,485,000</b>
■ Public Support (In-Kind)	<b>\$1,156,000</b>
■ Investments/Grants	<b>\$218,000</b>

### EXPENSES

■ Wish Program	<b>\$3,360,500</b>
■ Management & General	<b>\$538,500</b>
■ Fundraising	<b>\$576,000</b>

## OUR FY25 WISH STATS

### *Top 5 Wish Types*

Walt Disney World®.....	97
Domestic Travel.....	25
Celebrity.....	24
Shopping Spree.....	20
Hawaii Travel.....	13

### *Age range*

2.5-5.....	40
6-8.....	47
9-11.....	37
12-14.....	39
15-17.....	55
18+.....	12

### *Illness Types*

Cancer.....	42
Leukemia.....	37
Blood Disorder.....	25
Brain Tumor.....	23
Nervous System Disorder.....	20
Other.....	83

# Working together to bring *hope*

We know that our work would not be possible without the commitment, creativity, and generosity of countless donors, partners, volunteers, and champions of our mission. Together, you make every wish a moment to remember, bringing hope and joy to children and families right when they need it most.

## COMMUNITY PARTNER SPOTLIGHT

### *Wishes at Watermans Celebrity Bartending Challenge*

Richard Lytle and Barbara Pugh first became involved with Make-A-Wish Eastern North Carolina over a decade ago as volunteers for an event called Wine, Women and Shoes. "I always thought that Make-A-Wish was such a wonderful organization," said Pugh. "I loved the cause, and I wanted to be a part of it." She recruited Lytle to help with the event, and the two quickly formed a partnership that

would grow into something even bigger. When Wine, Women and Shoes ended, they wanted to continue making an impact, and out of that conversation, the Wishes at Waterman's Celebrity Bartending Challenge was born. The event brings together leaders from the real estate and mortgage industries in Wilmington, N.C., each stepping into the spotlight as a celebrity bartender. In the month leading up to the challenge, participants create fundraising pages and reach out to their networks to collect "Tips for Wishes." On event day, each bartender works a one hour shift behind the bar, rallying coworkers, friends, and family to help raise funds for



children with critical illnesses. Since its inception, Wishes at Watermans has raised over \$500,000, a truly incredible feat. Over the years, the event has featured special guests including professional athletes, local TV anchors, and radio DJs, giving the evening a true celebrity feel. "The night of the event is just so much fun. The camaraderie and kindness shown, plus knowing the funds raised benefit kids in our area makes it all worth it," said Pugh. Wishes at Watermans continues to be a shining example of how creativity, dedication, and community come together to make a lasting difference in the lives of wish kids and their families.



## CORPORATE PARTNER SPOTLIGHT

# *M/I Homes Brings Hope and Joy*

Home truly is where the heart is, and our incredible partners at M/I Homes Raleigh continue to show just how much heart they have for our mission. Their team dedicated tremendous time, effort, and resources to the M/I Homes benefit home project, transforming their craft into hope for children with critical illnesses across eastern North Carolina. This year, M/I Homes raised \$75,000 through the sale of their Friendship

Benefit Home, uniting vendors, builders, and employees in support of our local community. All of these funds will go directly to granting life-changing wishes for children and families throughout our 49-county chapter area. Through their generosity and compassion, M/I Homes continues to build hope, connection, and brighter futures for children from the Triangle to the coast.



M/I HOMES

## TOP NATIONAL PARTNERS



Academy of Early Education

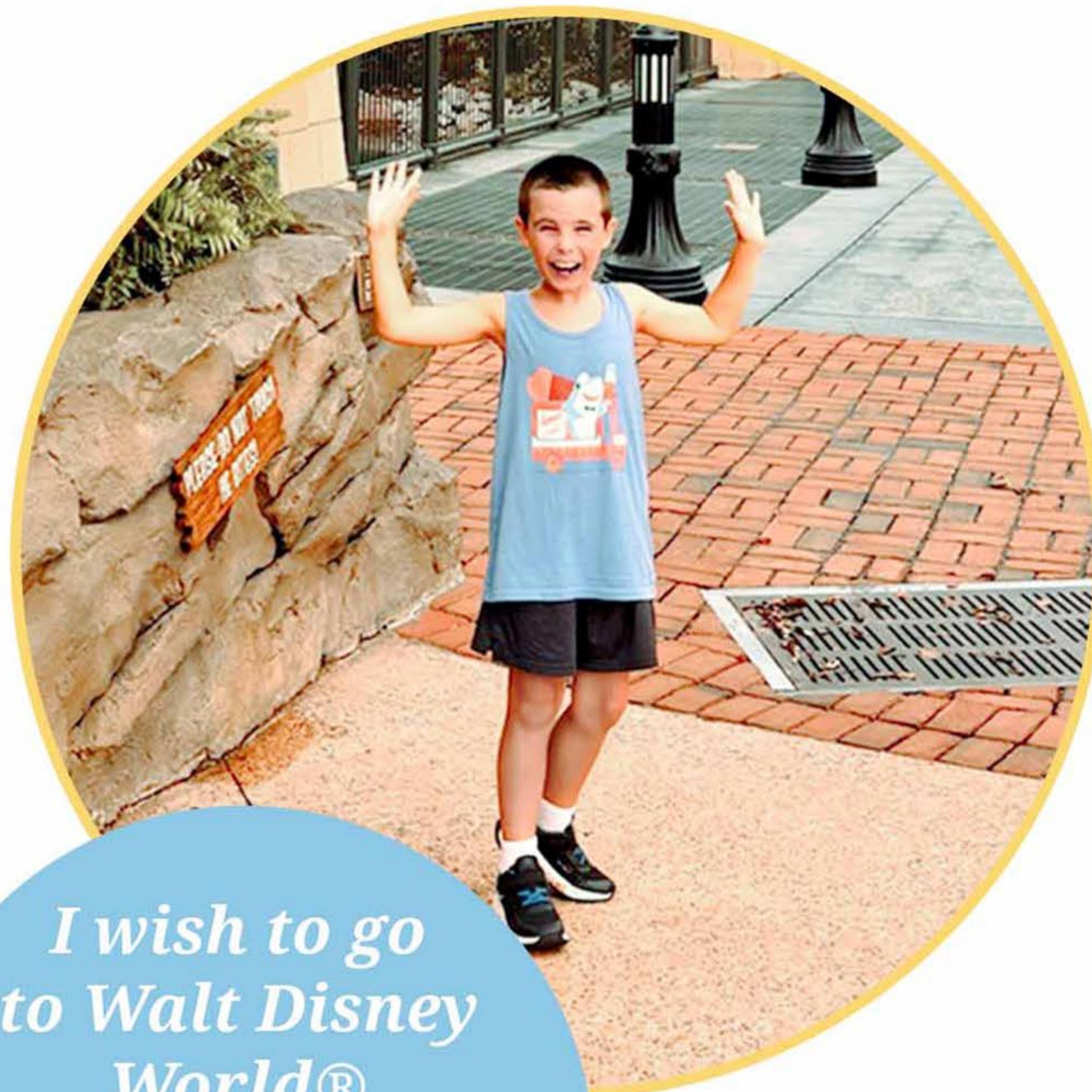


## TOP LOCAL PARTNERS



# Wish *highlights*

A few more lives **YOU** helped transform in FY25



*I wish to go  
to Walt Disney  
World®*

Flynn, 8  
Johnston County  
genetic disorder



*I wish to  
go to Hawaii*  
Alexis, 18  
Pender County  
lymphoma

*"His days are usually  
filled with doctors  
appointments or resting  
from pain. So to have a  
week where he was  
waking up happy was a  
blessing."*

-Emma  
Flynn's Mom



*I wish to  
have a golf cart*  
Kaedyn, 12  
Wake County  
leukemia

# Looking ahead to a year of *hope and* *celebration*



As we close out our fiscal year, we once again thank you for being part of our community of wishmakers. As we look ahead to FY26, we are excited to celebrate our 40th anniversary with you! Here is a sneak peek of how we are celebrating 40 years of transforming lives across eastern North Carolina.

## OUR FY26 SCHEDULE OF EVENTS

### 1. Join us in celebrating 40 years of transforming lives!

FY26 marks our 40th year of granting wishes, and we want to celebrate with YOU! Stay tuned for more information on how you can join us.

### 2. We are going to grant our 5000th wish in FY26

Connect with us now so you don't miss the celebration!

### 3. Don't miss out on our Wishes in Wonderland Wishmaker's Gala

Join us for a whimsical night in Wilmington, N.C. on March 19, 2026 as we celebrate the power of a wish.

### 4. Our Annual Wish Ball is now in October

Our premiere event in Raleigh, N.C. will be on October 15th, 2026! Don't miss this inspiring evening as we highlight the past year of wishes and those who make them possible.

Your unwavering generosity and commitment have brought hope and joy to thousands of children and their families in eastern North Carolina. Thank you for believing in the power of a wish.

*To be part of all of these events and more, head to [wish.org/eastnc/our-events](https://www.wish.org/eastnc/our-events) or scan the QR code.*



# Our leaders

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Regional Director of Major Accounts  
| Datadog

### MISSION DELIVERY CHAIR

#### **Bryan Wilson**

Sr. Director, Head of Learning &  
Development | Accord BioPharma

### DEVELOPMENT CHAIR

#### **Tom McDonald**

Senior Account Manager | Presidio

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Wilmington Dermatology Center

#### **Dr. Nicholas Befera**

Assistant Professor of Radiology |  
Duke University Health System

#### **Alicia Belle**

Founder & Owner | Mega Raleigh

#### **Dr. Charles Williams**

Globally Tested C-Suite Executive |  
Doctorate in Finance | US Navy  
Captain (Retired)

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Vice President of Quality Assurance |  
Cullinan Therapeutics

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Communications | Ensemble Health  
Partners

#### **Kristen Koch**

VP - Talent, Americas | Hitachi  
Energy

### SECRETARY

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Safety Director | Clancy & Theys  
Construction Company

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#### **Stacy Lindley**

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#### **Joe Overby**

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Manager | Overby Marine Sales and  
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#### **Lindsay Boyce**

Partner | Cooper Tierney Law Offices

#### **Mary Wills Bode**

Senator | North Carolina Senate  
District 18

#### **Marcus Ginyard**

Director of Special Projects |  
University of North Carolina at  
Chapel Hill

#### **Brian Washburn**

President of the Bruce Washburn  
Foundation | Life Sciences  
Consultant

#### **Halle Vakani**

Partner and Chair | Capital Markets  
Practice Group, Wyrick Robbins  
Yates & Ponton LLP

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