

Hilton Head **HEROES**

Counting blessings through the eyes of a child

Looking at the world through a child's eyes gives new perspective to the simplest of everyday things. Suddenly, a sunset is more brilliant, the ocean more magical, a dip in the pool more refreshing. When you see these things, and more, through the eyes of a child who rarely gets to lead what the rest of us define as a "normal" life, then the world has never looked better, and you feel especially blessed.

The men and women associated with Hilton Head Heroes get to take part in this blessing on a regular basis. Hilton Head Heroes is a non-profit organization whose purpose is to give chronically or terminally ill children and their families a cost-free vacation in our area.

Founded in 1998 by local performer Gregg Russell, Hilton Head Heroes is a dream come true for many families around the country. At the time, Russell was traveling around the country and enjoying entertaining the crowds with his performances. He also began giving free performances in the children's hospitals in each city. Talking with the children in the hospital, he noticed their little eyes light up when they learned about Hilton Head, with its beautiful beaches, comfortable climate, and numerous exciting activities. Many of these children had never even been well enough to travel to the ocean, or really enjoy a vacation with their families. Many of these families are emotionally and financially devastated after years of tirelessly caring for a sick child, and the very idea of relaxing in Hilton Head is like a heavenly gift for them.

Gregg and his wife, Lindy, were so touched by the children in these hospitals, they realized they wanted to do something to help. So, the idea for Hilton Head Heroes was born. Gregg and Lindy were thrilled to get the organization up and running. Lindy reports that she is overwhelmed by the wonderful volunteers who work tirelessly to make sure each family enjoys a great vacation. For one week, at least, the children and their families, all of whom deserve to relax, don't have to worry about a thing. Word about Hilton Head Heroes quickly spread, and many referrals for families come from doctors and hospital chaplains from all over the country.

Hilton Head Heroes currently has a local board comprised of twelve members, along with host families, who serve as greeters for each arriving family. Volunteers work to put together "coupon books" so each family can enjoy a cost-free vacation. Certificates are included for grocery stores, restaurants, entertainment, activities, etc. along with coupons for free or reduced-cost lodging.

Host families have learned about Hilton Head Heroes in various ways. Some heard from friends about the organization, some read about it in local publications, and some learned about it through the Summer Concert Series. Veteran host family John and Joan Geisler say each family they host is different, but each one warms their hearts. By the end of the week, the children are bubbling over with excitement, eager to tell their hosts what they saw and did during their Hilton Head vacation. They are



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full of smiles and enthusiasm, which is what the program is all about.

Most of the hosts' work is completed behind the scenes, before the families ever leave their home to travel to Hilton Head. Often, the children and sometimes their families are nervous about leaving home. So, the hosts serve as "connecting links" between the family and their dream vacation. They help answer questions and reassure the families about what to expect. When the family arrives, the hosts meet them and get them oriented to the area, give them their "coupon books," and answer any questions they may have. And, during their vacation here, the hosts are available to answer any questions that arise during the vacation week. The vacationing families stay either in donated villas or private homes while in the area.

Bob and Barbara Mooney, also experienced hosts, say each time they host a family, it gets better and better. They say there aren't enough adjectives to describe the incredible feeling they get from being part of Hilton Head Heroes. They look forward to hosting each year. Bob Mooney recalled a touching event that resulted after their first year hosting. During their first year, a little boy named Nicholas came to Hilton Head and had a great vacation. The next year, Bob and Barbara were at a local restaurant when a familiar little voice called out, "There's my heroes!" Bob and Barbara immediately recognized that it was Nicholas. They rushed over to greet him and said, "No. You're our hero!" Bob and Barbara say they will never forget that experience and how happy they were to have been able to help little Nicholas. They also say it is amazing to look at the world through the eyes of these children and their families, who have learned to take nothing for granted.

The largest annual fund raiser for Hilton Head Heroes is "Birdies for Charity," which takes place during the Heritage Golf Tournament. Pledges are collected on how many birdies will be scored. In addition, some items are sold during the annual Summer Concert Series. However, donations of money and time are always appreciated. Lindy Russell says it costs approximately \$1,200 per family to do a vacation, and help with funding and volunteering is always appreciated. Anyone who has questions, wants to make a donation, or volunteer, please call either (843) 671-4939 or write to Hilton Head Heroes, P.O. Box 3027, Hilton Head Island, SC 29928. — Kristy Gillinder