How the warm smell of popcorn extends the welcome at Dallas' Scottish Rite for Children

Staff and volunteers work to ensure young patients are eager to return to the hospital 'with a Disney-like feel.'



Volunteer Ken Morford hands a box of popcorn to 10-year-old Juanita Sauceda at the Scottish Rite for Children hospital in Dallas.(Jason Janik / Special Contributor)

Whenever 7-year-old Audra Stovall hops off the elevator at Scottish Rite for Children in Dallas, it's first things first.

Drawn by the smell of popcorn in the air, Audra will make a beeline to a sky-lit atrium lobby where she knows she'll find a smiling volunteer ready with stickers and a snack dished out from the vintage-style popcorn machine.

There's magic in the ritual Audra has repeatedly performed since her first visit to Scottish Rite in 2017, shortly after her adoption from China.

"I smell the goodness," said Audra, an active, bubbly Frisco second-grader who was born with a club foot and amniotic band syndrome, a rare condition that caused her to have shortened or missing fingers and toes.

Scottish Rite's signature popcorn scent is symbolic of the pediatric orthopedic care pioneer's mission to give childhoods back to kids like Audra.

At Scottish Rite, there's a running joke that the only time you see patients cry is when it's time for them to go home.

"There's so much serious medical care that happens behind the scenes, but it comes with a Disney-like feel," explained Ashley Givens, vice president of development and events at Scottish Rite. "We are so intentional with how we are engaging these children at a level where they find inspiration."

Established in 1921 to provide compassionate care for children with polio, the nonprofit hospital recently marked 100 years of redefining the science of healing muscles, joints and bones. It's known for research and treatment of pediatric orthopedics and certain related arthritic, neurological and learning disorders. It recently expanded its local presence north to Frisco with the opening of Scottish Rite for Children Orthopedic and Sports Medicine Center and Scottish Rite for Children at The Star.

The quest to treat the whole child, an approach offered to all patients regardless of their ability to pay, focuses on the experience — not the

diagnosis. It's a tone that starts with a building design studied worldwide and the "how can we help?" attitude that comes naturally to those who work and volunteer there.

Located near the corner of Maple and Oak Lawn avenues, Scottish Rite's current building on the Dallas campus, which opened in 1977, was intentionally built with two levels below ground to appear less intimidating to children. It's fronted by a youth fitness park and a wheelchair-accessible playground on the grounds where the original hospital once stood.

Scottish Rite for Children's building was intentionally built with two levels below ground to appear less intimidating to kids.(Jason Janik / Special Contributor)

Inside the front doors, framed with giant bright red crayons, are vibrant splashes of color, artwork and whimsical elements like a colossal mobile and giant kaleidoscope, waiting rooms with activity stations, and space, sports and seasonal themes throughout.

Wide-open hallways are filled with natural light and have no medical equipment in sight. Instead, such equipment is kept in a central "bullpen" area behind the clinic rooms that were architecturally designed in a circle around this core. Here, patient teams can collaborate on care before they enter the exam room through a separate interior door.

And then there's the popcorn — 6,000 pounds of it popped each year, as part of a purposeful design element that appeals to all the senses. Money raised through popcorn and gift shop sales is earmarked for a hospital wish list that covers patient needs that don't fall under the current budget. Recently approved wish list items include a play kitchen and craft supplies and software for the Movement Science Lab.

Longtime volunteers like 83-year-old Ken Morford are the heartbeat of Scottish Rite. Morford is a familiar face around Scottish Rite, starting in the mailroom as a volunteer 17 years ago after he retired. Morford arrives an hour early for his 8 a.m. shift each Wednesday to ensure his popcorn station is ready to greet the day.

Longtime volunteers like 83-year-old Ken Morford are the heartbeat of Scottish Rite for Children.(Jason Janik / Special Contributor)

Morford, who lives in Arlington, has been known to underwrite a free popcorn day to honor the memory of a late best friend and fellow volunteer. He said he enjoys "the excitement, joy and wonderment you see in a child as they are watching the popcorn pop."

"The volunteers and employees enjoy working together, and all they want to do is one thing: to make every child enjoy their life — whatever that is," he said. "It is just beautiful to see."

When at full force, Scottish Rite volunteers are an army of more than 800 people — up to 50 people a day — who commit to regular shifts for the long-term, time that adds up to money saved on full-time employees.

"Their impact is profound," Givens said. For Audra's mom, Kim Stovall, it was

the little things that helped to immediately quell the family's fears of the unknown: the smell of popcorn and friendly faces, the volunteer who slipped headphones on her daughter during a cast change appointment and the nurse after the first surgery who showed them how to fill a wagon with pillows and stuffed animals so Audra could go out and about.

A playground welcomes kids to Scottish Rite for Children in Dallas.(Jason Janik / Special Contributor)

Audra can't wait to see her doctors at Scottish Rite so that she can share the details of her busy life, filled with tumbling, soccer and fun playing with her three older brothers.

"They are not just there treating her medical condition," Kim Stovall said. "They care about her and are invested in her."

Audra's medical journey once included full arm and leg casts, surgeries and weekly or bi-weekly appointments, but now has transitioned to occasional follow-up checks. The walk to the lobby for popcorn remains a sweet and

savory reminder of how far Audra has come.

"When she starts running through halls, and I'm walking behind her just seeing her run like that, I can't help but almost tear up sometimes," Kim Stovall said. "I know all they've done to make that possible. Audra can do anything now; there are no limitations. And that is all because of Scottish Rite."

How to help

Scottish Rite for Children hopes to resume new volunteer applications, currently on pause, in the months to come. For more information, visit scottishriteforchildren.org/get-involved.