

Children's Locks And Love A Winning Combination

By HEATHER J. CHIN
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When Elizabeth Strenge was 10 years old, she had her long, brown hair tied back in a ponytail and cut by her mother, who put the resulting 13-inch long tail into a plastic bag and envelope for mailing.

Elizabeth's hair traveled all the way from the Strenge's home in Yardley to Fort Myers, Fla., where a public non-profit called Locks of Love used each strand to create custom hairpieces for children diagnosed with any condition that results in total hair loss.

The vacuum-fitted hairpieces help restore these youngsters' self-esteem and confidence during their treatment and recovery.

While it may seem that having the latest hairstyle is big for children and teenagers today, knowing what their cut hair will be used for seems to far outweigh anxiety felt at losing long tresses. Now the nervousness felt is that of excitement.

"I recently had a little girl about age 7 come in once a month for me to measure her hair to donate," said Debbie Michel, who has been a stylist at the Warwick Hair Salon for 34 years. "She was about four inches away from the required 10 but was willing to have me cut her hair within an inch of her scalp if it would meet the requirements."

For 12-year-old Jackie Gibson, the choice to donate her long blonde hair was an easy one. "I thought there are

kids who don't have any hair and it's a great program to make hair for children who don't have any," said the fourth-grader from Country Day School of The Sacred Heart in Bryn Mawr.

Founded in 1998, Locks of Love works individually with children and families from across the country who have either applied or been recommended by a doctor, collaborating to design the custom prosthetic.

Using only human hair, hairpieces are hand-sewn to the child's head size and shape. They look natural and, according to Locks of Love's communications director, Lauren Kukkamaa, "allows them to play sports, run, swim and stay active without fear of it falling off or someone pulling it off their head."

The group says that thousands of hair bundles arrive each year. Each hairpiece requires 6-10 ponytails and 4-6 months to manufacture and children between the ages of 6 and 18 can receive a new prosthesis every 18 months, for a total of up to 8 hairpieces.

The child recipients have had conditions ranging from alopecia areata, injuries from radiation treatment to the brain stem, severe burns and dermatological conditions.

Monetary donations are also accepted and used toward production costs. They are tax deductible and ideal for donors, such as boys, whose hair is too short to donate.

"I learned about Locks of Love

Locks Of Love Donation Guidelines

Donated hair is evaluated for its usefulness according to the following guidelines:

- It must be at least 10", clean and dry.
- It must be bundled in a ponytail or a braid.
- Bleached hair cannot be used.
- Hair that has been dyed or permed can be used.

about 25 years ago," said Ms. Michel, the stylist. "The donations have increased to the point that I now wait until I have about six ponytails to send. People now bring them in from friends and family."

Ms. Kukkamaa said that the organization is growing and is committed to finding and helping children directly, but is also working toward expanding its mission to provide treatment services.

"Since 2006, we've been able to provide funds to medical organizations for research into alopecia," she said. "[The University of Miami's presence] in our backyard [also] allows us to be educated regularly by them."

Donor ages range from young children to those in their 70s, but over 80 percent of the donors are children themselves, this charity has become a place where children are able to help



Courtesy

A student at Binghamton University in New York is all smiles with her ponytail at a fundraising event for Locks of Love.

one another. More than just hair, these hairpieces provide mutual gifts of caring, confidence and community.

Both Elizabeth and Jackie plan to continue growing out their hair and will encourage others to donate. Now 15 years old, Elizabeth has donated two more ponytails, with the latest measuring 10 inches. Her younger sister has also joined the effort.

Remembering the first time her blonde hair cut for Jackie enthused, "I was so excited that it would be used to help other people. I asked 'is it a good idea' and I great idea."

Heather J. Chin can be reached at hchin@thebulletin.us