



severe illnesses and disabilities through the cuddly friends as well as a variety of programs.

“What I thought was going to be a part-time job making 20,000 Shadow Buddies a year – or maybe 10,000 – has turned into 60 to 70 hours a week. We produce anywhere from 40,000 to 60,000 Shadow Buddies a year,” she explains.

Since its founding, 1.6 million Shadow Buddies have been distributed worldwide in 19 different countries and all 50 states. The organization has worked with 178 hospitals as well as other charities and organizations benefiting kids. The Shadow Buddies product line now includes Buddies that represent 31 medical and emotional conditions, providing kids with comfort and emotional support while fostering compassion and awareness of differences.

“That’s our whole goal. We want these kids to know how much they are loved and that they are just like the boy next door, whether they have a heart scar or a port or have to check their blood for diabetes,” Marty says. “They are just like the kid next door, and they need to feel that inclusion.”

While the mission has stayed the same over the past 24 years, Marty and company constantly add new programs and experiences for kids. Last Christmas that included taking kids on a fantasy flight in partnership with United Airlines. A group of 52 medically vulnerable kids from HopeKids and KU Medical Center got to board a plane, fly to the “North Pole” – in actuality a 50-minute spin around Kansas City – and land in a winter wonderland in a Kansas City International terminal that took the team 18 hours to decorate. The children were greeted by their families and received bags of toys as well as invaluable memories. For many of the kids, it was their first time flying. Tragically, around 20 of the kids were likely celebrating their last Christmas, Marty says.

Other programs include Courage Capes, an art therapy program for

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