

Room of Magic

Riverside opens movie theater for pediatric patients

By Antonio Young
ayoung@daily-journal.com
815-937-3385

When Kayla Trudeau of St. Anne first set foot in Riverside Medical Center's new "Room of Magic," her eyes grew wide with amazement.

She didn't say a word, but the 4-year-old liked what she saw.

Life-size Oscar-like statues greeted her near the entrance. Scattered about the room's walls were colorful stars, and an old-fashioned popcorn machine stood in a corner. Kayla smiled on recent Tuesday as she walked the room's aisles, plopping into a comfy, orange sofa seat < one of 32 tiny chairs made just for kids.

The Room of Magic, a brightly-colored auditorium with state-of-the-art home theater equipment, was recently designed for Riverside's pediatric patients like Kayla, admitted on the previous Sunday after suffering complications from her diabetes triggered by the flu.

A hospital is no place for kids, but Kayla's time spent at Riverside was made much more pleasurable as she kicked back under dimmed lights and watched one of her favorite films, "The Incredibles," on the theater's medium-sized movie screen.

Her 11-year-old brother, Austin, and sister, Jenna, 5, also enjoyed the experience, complete with surround sound.

"It looks like a real movie theater," Austin said.

Their mother, Cheri, believes the Room of Magic is a special treat for the hospital's youngest patients.

"All kids like to go to the movies. And when you're all bundled up in the hospital and not able to go outside, (the theater) will make it a little more fun," Cheri said.

Giving back

That's exactly why Riverside opened its doors for such a project.

The Room of Magic was spearheaded by Ron Romano, owner of Connected Community, a Kankakee provider of audio and video technology for commercial and residential environments. Knowing how much kids love movies, Romano pitched the idea of

designing the theater to Riverside's staff last spring. During his research, he discovered that The Elf Foundation, a non-profit organization based in Hollywood, had been designing theaters in children's hospitals across the country.

Romano then created a network between Riverside and The Elf Foundation.

"I just really wanted to do something to give back to the community," said Romano, a longtime Kankakee resident.

The Elf Foundation has created more than 50 Rooms of Magic in children's hospitals across the country. But Romano said Riverside is among the first non-children's hospitals to include a theater, and it's also the first hospital in Illinois.

Romano said Connected Community donated design and installation labor, programming expertise and some audio/visual equipment. Other contributing businesses were Union City, Calif.-based Runco International; Rockleigh, N.J.-based Crestron Electronics; Monster Cable Products, Inc., based in Brisbane, Ca.; and Jensen & Halstead Ltd. of Chicago.

The groups donated \$55,000 worth of equipment and architectural, engineering and design labor time, Romano said.

The theater was completed in May and earlier this month, held its Hollywood-themed open house featuring a red carpet for attendees.

Lifting spirits

Being in the hospital is difficult for anyone, but it's even worse for squirmy little kids. Ann Strawson, team leader for Riverside's pediatrics department, said some children become bored while recovering from an illness. And having spent days of taking medication and undergoing medical exams, children often leave the hospital with a fear of returning, Strawson said.

"If we can bring them in here and entertain them, maybe they'll leave here feeling that the hospital is a friendly place," she said.

Although kids have enjoyed the hospital's playroom with children's books, board games, Little Tike Toys and a TV and a VCR for years, Strawson said it pales in comparison to the Room of Magic, located on the hospital's third floor.

The theater features a 106-inch screen, digital light projector, surround sound system, advanced electrical power protection, automated lighting, and full integrated system control, all of which combine to provide an ideal movie theater experience.

Strawson said the kids must have a doctor's permission to visit the theater. Ideal patients are those with broken limbs, recovering from surgery or who have gotten over the flu and

are simply waiting to go home, she said. They don't allow infectious children to interact with healthy ones in the theater.

The room is also offered as "a reward" for patients of the hospital's pediatric behavioral program. Strawson said those patients will also go at separate times from traditional pediatric patients.

Sticking to The Elf Foundation's mission of providing entertainment for kids, Riverside hopes to build a library of fun, child-friendly movies & and even show new flicks on their release dates.

HOW TO HELP: Riverside is seeking community donations to stock its Room of Magic with a library of children's DVDs. Send your donations to: Anne Strawson, Riverside Medical Center, 350 N. Wall, Kankakee, IL, 60901; or use the drop-box near Riverside's Gift Shop.