

# Child life specialist eases children's hospital experience

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"Any little thing that can be done to lower their anxiety or make an experience less traumatic is what our goal is," said Kelley Lee, Tripler Army Medical Center's child life specialist. "It can be from dropping a crayon and coloring book to a child who might not need a whole lot of that intensive care to staying with a patient as long as we can and rubbing their back and talking to them.

"I have a passion for this...I get more from these kids than I think they get from me," Lee said smiling. "I go home so happy to meet these families and [learn about] their cultures and how they are families together. I get so much out of this," she continued.

Lee is so young looking that she could pass for a high school student, but is an energetic and loving child life specialist - who seems made for this profession. She has a master's degree in child development from Florida State University, worked an internship in child life in North Carolina and was offered a job two days after she graduated from Kapi'olani Medical Center for Women and Children.

At Tripler a little more than a year, Lee really makes a difference with the children and said she absolutely loves working with them. "There is always a challenge here," she said.

"What can we do for the patients?" is the question Lee and her Red Cross volunteers try to answer each day - from opening up the play room and inviting the patients to come into the pediatric ward, to setting up an activity for them, to doing an activity at a child's bedside who isn't able to go to the play room.

In the treatment room is a treasure box containing donated gifts. The pediatric nurses can give the gifts to little patients who have to go through invasive procedures, such as having an IV started. "Their little veins are so small it may take a couple of tries [to get the IV in]," Lee said. She also wants to establish stress boxes filled with toys in different hospital areas. She feels this could possibly help to divert the children's attention from the procedures they are going through.

Sometimes Lee needs to explain to people why she is playing with the patients.

"A lot of people will walk by and I'll either be in the patient's room or the play room working with play doh or doing a puzzle and a lot of times it is just play to start a relationship with the child. I encourage other staff members, nurses and

doctors to come and play with the kids because these children see them doing only one thing - IV pokes or just checking them for whatever their ailment is. By playing with them they can open up the relationship and it's good for both of them," Lee explained.

By creating a bond with the children through play, Lee said, it makes it easier for the children to open up and talk about things troubling them. Also, sometimes the children will just start "spitting out information on how they feel or think about what's going on with them."

She shared this example. "I was with a 14-year-old doing a puzzle on the floor and people were walking back and forth looking like they were thinking, 'Man, what a job she has - doing a puzzle in the patient's room.' But at that time, we were talking about his cancer and how the toughest part of the ordeal for him was his leg shots and that there was a certain way he liked getting his leg shots. He liked it very slow instead of quick and fast and getting it over...and so I asked him 'Is it okay if I put that in your chart?' so that anyone who's going to be giving you the shots will know.

"That's the kind of thing that really helps in working with these kids - a lot of play therapy.

The children have the same emotions as adults," Lee said. "Some are angry, some are scared, some have misconceptions - sometimes a lot worse than adults. That's why the child life program exists - to explain to them on their terms what's happening to their bodies, why the hospital staff is doing what it's doing and why they're in the hospital," she continued.

"Maybe they ate a cookie they weren't supposed to eat before dinner and then they got really, really sick and they thought it was because of that. We really need to explain things to these kids so they don't get the idea they're being punished," Lee said.

One of the most compelling stories Lee told was about a 10-year-old boy she knew during her internship in North Carolina who thought he was being punished by God for having testicular cancer. A family member, as Lee so diplomatically put it, wasn't very nice and had told him this.

"He was very quiet and very shy and didn't talk to a whole lot of people," she said. "He was very kind and sweet and very polite, but it was a matter of going in there every day and sitting with him, and just talking with him and playing with him.

"After awhile, [he started] warming up and he just came out with that one day. We were playing video games and he said, 'You know, I know why I'm sick.' And I



Margaret Tippy photo

A three-year old boy looks on from his hospital bed, as Tripler Army Medical Center's Child Life Specialist Kelley Lee attempts to put him at ease, as his aunt looks on.

said why? He said, 'I'm being punished by God - my stepmother told me.' I willed up and I knew why I needed to do this job," Lee said.

Child life specialists have child-like personalities, she said laughing. "It helps. We can get on the ground and roll around and not get embarrassed. We can be silly and funny and be okay with it. We need to do these things so these kids don't walk around thinking it's their fault."

Lee is the mother of 14-month-old daughter, Kaya, and wife of Dr. Kendrick Lee, an emergency room physician who works at Castle Medical Center, Queens Medical Center and Wahiawa General Hospital. She is pregnant with their second child.

But she still takes care of her hospital "family." Lee made a visit to Tripler on Christmas morning to make sure the three pediatric inpatients were taken care of and celebrated the holidays.

Oamtaker Simon, an 8-year-old from the island of Truk, is one of the patients for whom Lee and the pediatric nurses made Christmas a little merrier. Lee had requested donations of toys so that all of the inpatients would receive gifts on Christ-

mas morning and received quite a bit from the Tripler staff's generosity.

She took three bags of gifts into Simon. He smiled at her and picked out one gift. Lee told him, 'No, no, no - they're all for you,' but he didn't catch on.

"Santa came and went and we're in the hallway and Oamtaker walks out with reindeer ears on his head. He's walking around smiling and hanging out in the hallway. I thought, 'I don't think he realizes that those gifts are for him.' I pulled him back into his room and I sat him down in his chair," Lee said, laughing herself. "I told him to rip the paper off those presents...and he just started laughing and laughing...he was so excited.

"We had an interpreter from Truk come to find out what type of presents he really wanted. And he really wanted what he called 'the Army man that crawls.' So one of the nurses got that for him...when he came to that gift he was laughing and laughing and wanted to get it open as quickly as he could. He was just cracking up. It was so awesome. It was great - he was so appreciative."

Anyone interested in volunteering for the program may reach Lee at 433-6825.