



Someone to Count On

Eagles Kicker David Akers
Is a Frequent Visitor at CHOP



“I’ve seen how tough a child’s illness is on the whole family,” says Akers. “We want to do what we can to make a family’s stay a little easier.”

When David Akers stops by the Hospital, patients smile. During a visit to the Pulmonary Inpatient Unit in November, Akers chatted with Madeline Bankes, 8, (facing page) and Christopher Brooks, 20 (left).

If there’s one thing Philadelphia Eagles kicker David Akers is known for on the field, it’s his consistency. A four-time Pro Bowler and a 12-year veteran of the Eagles, he is the NFL’s leading points scorer since 2000. But few people realize how consistent he is in another respect: His unwavering support of CHOP has been truly remarkable.

During football season, Akers visits the Hospital almost every week to help raise the spirits of children and their families. In addition, his foundation, David Akers Kicks for Kids, has raised more than \$250,000 for Children’s Hospital.

“He’s very warm and caring with the kids,” says Madeline Bell, CHOP’s president and chief operating officer. “And whether it’s donating his kicking shoes for an auction to benefit CHOP or leading the warm-up exercises at our Healthy Kids Day, I have never known David to turn down the opportunity to help.”

On one recent visit to 5 West, child life specialist Elise Ehrenreich introduces Akers to a young girl sitting silently in her hospital bed. “Do you like sports?” he asks her. The girl shakes her head no, looking at him with a wary expression. “She rides horses,” volunteers a relative. Akers, a Kentucky native, has his in. “What kind of horse do you have? How many hands high is it?” Within minutes, the girl brightens, her sadness visibly melting away under Akers’ upbeat questioning. As he bids her goodbye, Ehrenreich shakes her head in amazement. “That is the first time I’ve seen her smile the whole time she’s been here.”

Akers had been visiting CHOP since 1999, but in 2004, his connection became personal. Just before Christmas, Akers’ 2-year-old son, Luke, developed a serious MRSA infection around his eye. The week Luke spent at Children’s Hospital was agonizing for Akers and his wife, Erika. But as challenging

as the experience was, they saw how financial struggles could further compound a family’s distress. Many children sat alone in their rooms because their families could not afford to be there.

Akers’ response was to create David’s Locker, a social work fund used to meet unexpected or emergency expenses for CHOP patients and their families. In the past, the fund has helped with necessities like utility bills, car insurance premiums or the cost of medical equipment not covered by insurance. When the father of a leukemia patient was laid off, David’s Locker provided gift cards to help keep food on the family’s table. “I’ve seen how tough a child’s illness is on the whole family,” says Akers. “We want to do what we can to make a family’s stay a little easier.”

To support the fund, Akers runs an annual fundraiser, Kicking in Spring. This year his foundation also held “An Evening of Comedy & Magic” at the Kimmel Center in Philadelphia. Fellow Eagle Jon Dorenbos, who periodically joins Akers in his weekly visits, was the host and one of the performing magicians.

Akers also started a program called Field of Dreams, which gives CHOP patients tickets to an Eagles home game. On the day of the game, Akers surprises the kids by personally meeting them on the field before the game and giving them a shopping spree in the Eagles Pro Shop.

For Akers, the children at CHOP help him keep a perspective on life. “I’m a competitor and I want to do well, but in the end, football is just a game,” he says. “These incredible kids show me again and again that there’s more to life than a couple of kicks.”

To read more of our interview with David Akers, please visit www.giftofchildhood.org/childrensview. ■