

Allianz gives employees a voice in company's giving program

BY JOHN HAGEMAN
STAFF WRITER

For every week of the last six months of her life, McKenna Johnson got to do something that helped her forget she had been diagnosed with non-Hodgkin's lymphoma.

During that brief time, she participated in the Minnesota branch of HopeKids, a charity that organizes events like Minnesota Twins games and movie premieres for kids with life-threatening diseases.

Her mother Krista, an Allianz Life Insurance Co. of North America employee, still supports the organization four years after McKenna's death at the age of 10. She helped it become one of Allianz's employee-elected charities for the second year in a row.

Each year, four elected charities receive \$25,000, as well as significant volunteer involvement from Allianz employees. This year, the American Cancer Society, the Animal Humane Society and the Down Syndrome Association of Minnesota were elected along with HopeKids.

The Annual Employee-elected Charity program is one of Allianz's numerous charitable activities. But rather than just a select group of people deciding who to write a check to, the program is based on employees' previous volunteerism.

For a charity to be elected, it must have at least 15 Allianz employees already volunteering there. The company holds a charity fair every year to give employees an idea of what each charity does.

"Our focus is really on employee engagement," said Laura Juergens, who leads the program at Allianz. "The feeling is that employees like to have a voice."

The company has been running the program for more than a decade, Juergens said.

Only two people run the Minnesota chapter of HopeKids, which serves 760 families in the



Submitted photo: Allianz employees volunteer for the 2010 Hope Day Festival. The event benefits the Minnesota chapter of HopeKids.

state. Volunteer contributions keep it running, said Josh Taylor, president of the nonprofit.

Krista Johnson had volunteered at the organization's annual Hope Day Festival before it became an Allianz employee-elected charity. Every January, she lobbies for HopeKids at the company's charity fair.

"It's really the best advertising we can get," Taylor said.

The Animal Humane Society uses Allianz's donation to help fund its spay and neuter program, as well as its human investigations program, which pairs two humane society employees with local law enforcement to inves-

tigate animal neglect, said Katie Nelson, vice president of development at the society.

Nelson added that Allianz is the organization's biggest corporate contributor.

"We've been really fortunate to have them," she said.

The American Cancer Society uses the funds to help keep its Hope Lodge near the University of Minnesota open. Children with cancer stay at the 90-room lodge for up to three months while they receive treatment at one of the many children's hospitals in the area.

American Cancer Society spokesperson Brea Atkinson said for every month a child

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Allianz's annual "Driving to Donate" charity golf tournament raised \$136,000 in August for the Alzheimer's Association of Minnesota and North Dakota.

On Sept. 25, Allianz employees will organize sporting events during the annual Washburn games, which is put on by the Minneapolis-based Washburn Center for Children. Each child who raises \$100 for the event will be entered in a raffle for \$1,000 toward a scholarship or other prizes.

Allianz holds an annual "Spirit of Giving" event when employees load semi trucks with food, toys and clothing for PRISM and Toys for Tots. In 2010, employees donated more than 32,000 pounds of food, 16,000 pounds of clothes and \$48,000 to PRISM, in addition to 2,900 toys and \$20,000 to Toys for Tots.

stays, families save \$1,000 over staying at a hotel. Without Allianz's contribution, the organization would have to make some "very tough decisions," Atkinson said.

In addition, Allianz employees participate in a 5K breast cancer walk, which raises \$120,000 every October.

"It's pretty rare to have this kind of contribution from a company," Atkinson said. "A lot of companies don't ... give their employees a voice. But they get a vote for where their money goes."

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