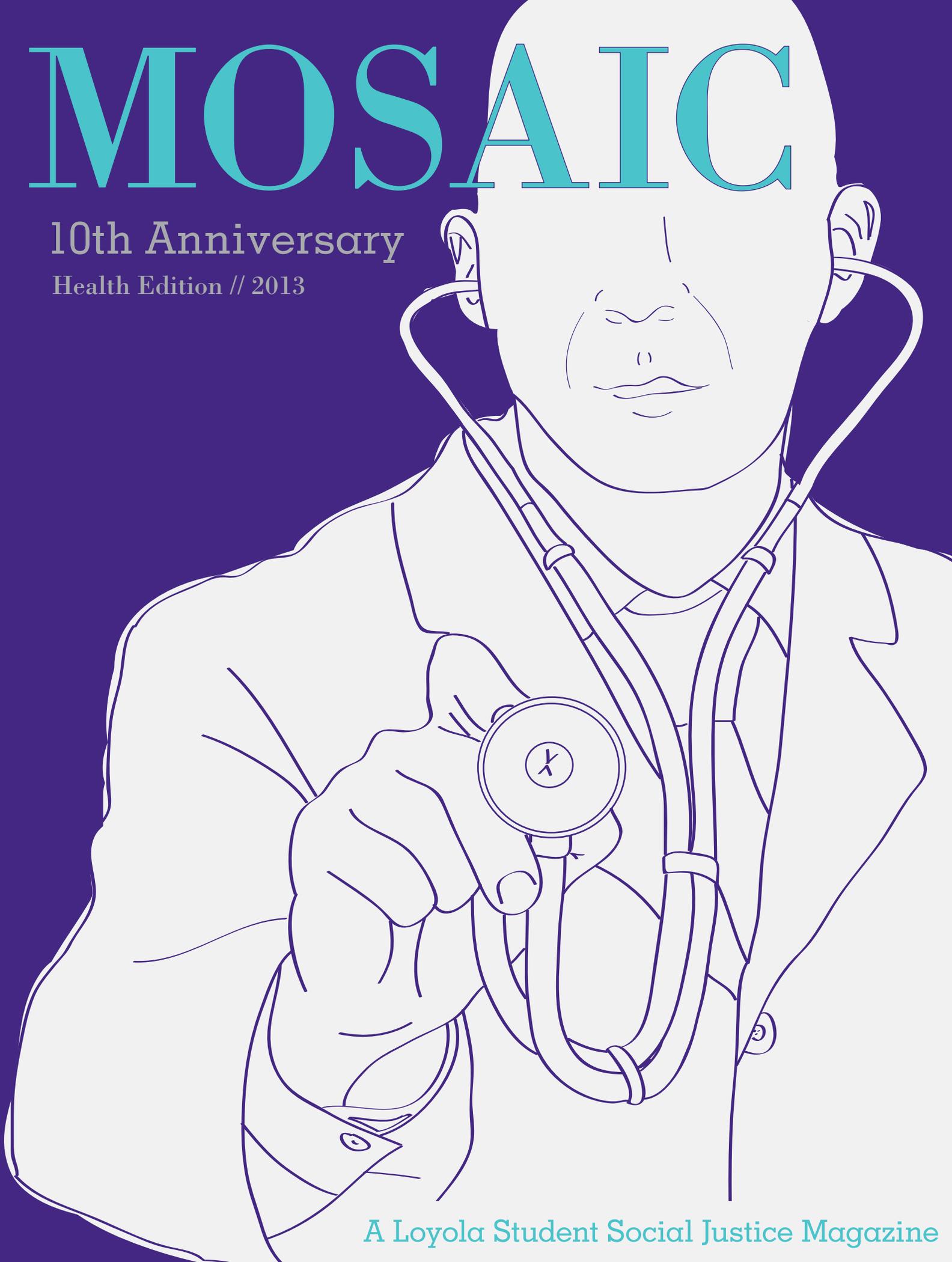


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ALMOST HOME

A Chicago-based rehabilitation center helps children beat the odds, gives them hope and the comforts of home.

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Left to right: JJ plays 'So Big' with his nurse, Merissa, as they watch the snow falling outside; Angel enjoys the playful companionship of Jessica who comes to AHK twice a week to volunteer with the children in Naperville; AHK celebrate Halloween in the Coleman Foundation Family Room.

The elevator doors opened to what looked like an upscale condominium, complete with a modern kitchen, spacious living room, and wide-open playroom. Just off the playroom was a nursery housing two white cribs with colorful striped blankets and walls decorated with bright artwork.

But this was not a traditional nursery. Thirteen electrical outlets flanked both cribs, confirming the special situations of the children who stayed in this particular nursery.

"These children will never go to college," said Deborah Grisko, president and CEO of Almost Home Kids. "They will never take dance lessons."

These children will have a chance to go home though. AHK is a transitional care facility for medically fragile

children, those who are in stable condition but have severe disabilities. They require around-the-clock care and often need a tracheotomy tube or ventilator.

AHK has two locations—one tucked away in the heart of downtown Chicago near Lurie Children's Hospital and another in the rural area of Naperville. This care facility helps children in a way wholly unique to Illinois. The two facilities can each provide care for 12 patients at a time. Eighty percent of the families the nonprofit serves live at or below the poverty level.

With more than 6,000 children in Illinois who are medically fragile, one-third of these children living in Chicago, AHK provides families with a place to learn about caring for their child and preparing for life at home after a long hospital stay.

"Our home is where company never stops coming," said Kathy Stegman, director of nursing at the Naperville facility. "We always have visitors and parents and children and the staff here, so this is a house where company just comes and goes."

The Naperville location has served more than 800 children since opening in 1992. Set on two-and-a-half acres of land surrounded by trees and walking trails, the home allows families to literally get a breath of fresh air.

"You know often it's the first time out of the hospital," Stegman said. "The children come here, and they get to go outside for the first time in months and months."

With half of the children coming from Lurie Children's Hospital, Almost Home Kids recently chose to expand in 2012, opening a second facility in

▶ 120: Number of days the transitional program lasts.

▶ 800: number of children served in Naperville since AHK opened.

▶ 6,000: number of children in Illinois who are medically fragile

downtown Chicago.

"Chicago is the urban home, and Naperville is the more residential home," said Judith McLean, the director of marketing and communications, "and Deborah was the one with the vision for Chicago."

Deborah Grisko always knew she wanted to become a nurse growing up.

"I like every day to be new and different," she said, "and I like to know that I learned something new every day, and I've been able to do that here."

After 20 years of medical experience, primarily in emergency room and critical care, Grisko joined Almost Home Kids six years ago. She is a mother of five children. Her third son, Tom, has Down syndrome. She has been an advocate for inclusion of those with special needs for years, so AHK just made sense.

"Every child has the right to grow up in a home, and there's no vehicle for that to happen unless you have an organization like this," she said. "Every child we take care of – it's as if it were one of my own children staying here."

AHK's transitional care program lasts for up to 120 days. Parents bring in all of their child's home medical equipment. As part of the program, the children begin therapy while the parents learn about the medical care needed for their child, including meal preparation.

"By the time [the parents] leave us, they're going to be not only competent but confident, just like they were a nurse," Grisko said. "We want them to be an expert."

A medical director comes in to see the children three days a week, while nurses are present 24/7. For every one child at AHK there are three nurses.

"All of our nurses have one thing in common, that they love our special populations," Stegman said. "We just start out with unique, caring nurses from the get go."

A final component of AHK is respite care for those who already made it home once before. The children in this program receive the same care as those in the transitional program, but parents are allowed to bring their children to the facilities for up to two weeks a year for any reason.

Grisko believes respite care is crucial to keeping families together.

"I've had children come in here, and the parents say to me they haven't even gone out to dinner in like 10 years themselves," she said. "They will come back a week later, and they look like they are 10 years younger. That is the most amazing thing to see." ☺