



Mt. Washington  
Pediatric Hospital

Where Children Go to Heal and Grow

An affiliate of University of Maryland Medical System and Johns Hopkins Medicine

# Turning Passion into Impact



**Lauren Perlin**, chair of the Mt. Washington Pediatric Foundation and founder of the hospital's ultra-successful Storybook Gala, shares her journey from dedicated mom to fundraising powerhouse—and **how you can turn your connection to a cause into making a difference.**

*Lauren and her husband are parents to three young daughters: 13-year-old Ava, 10-year-old Millie, and 8-year-old Sadie. They have lived in the Baltimore area for more than 20 years. Millie has Down syndrome, and she began coming to Mt. Washington Pediatric Hospital (MWPH) when she was just 4 weeks old. As Millie continued to thrive through her services at MWPH, Lauren saw an opportunity to use her career experience in development to give back.*

## How did you get started with MWPH?

My first job after college was in the development department at Union Memorial Hospital; while I was at MWPH for Millie's first appointment, I ran into my old boss, who was then the vice president of development and external affairs at MWPH.

He told me, "If you have the time, you should get involved. We do an annual fashion show as a fundraiser." I agreed to help out the first year with the show, and then I chaired the committee the following year. But after two years working on the event, my sense was that we could raise the bar—this was a lot of work and coordination for a relatively low net profit for the hospital. ►

### So, how did you raise the bar?

In 2012, I went to Shelly Stein, the hospital's president and CEO, with a pitch: I wanted to create a gala that would celebrate the hospital's amazing work and inspire people. My idea was to focus on awareness: getting the word out about the hospital and raising MWPH's profile in Baltimore. Our financial goal would be to break even, and we'd see what happened. He agreed to give me a shot.

It was a risk—trading a successful fundraiser for an unknown quantity. There were several nights when I lied awake worrying, “What if no one comes? What if we don't make the money back?”

I gathered a group of my friends and convinced them to join the gala committee, and I persuaded all the business owners I knew to sponsor the event. I was driven to help this hospital that had done so much for my family, and I had a team of amazing women on the committee with me, each of whom worked so hard to make this a success.

The gala was more successful than we thought possible. Tickets sold out within 10 minutes that first year, and in the eight years we've hosted the Storybook Gala, we've raised \$2 million in net profit for the hospital. We've always raised significant funds with this event, even in 2020 with COVID-19 wreaking havoc.

I've chaired the gala for three of its eight years and have worked on the committee even when other wonderful chairs took the lead. For me, it is the epitome of professional passion in both philanthropy and volunteer work. Leading with passion is the key to success.

### Many people never take the step of getting involved with an organization, even though they might be very grateful. What led you to make that decision?

I've always been the kind of person who is happy to be helpful, and I'm a jump-in-with-both-feet kind of volunteer.



Perlin at 2015 Storybook Gala

My connection to MWPH was so personal—getting involved was a no-brainer. It was not easy, but it was a simple decision. In those early days, I think I needed the hospital as much as the hospital needed me. It allowed me to use my brain in a different way, and it was challenging, though also fun and rewarding.

### Tell us about becoming the foundation board chair. Do you draw on a different skill set than you did as gala chair?

I feel really honored and humbled to be serving as foundation board chair. It's not something I would ever have envisioned being asked to do.

In terms of skill sets, my approach to both roles draws on the same core strengths, which I also use in my role as Director of Development for Camps Airy & Louise. I tend to have a casual approach that is more personal than “businessy.” People join organizations for many different reasons, but if they do not enjoy being a part of it, they will not stick around long. I believe that the more people feel like friends on a board, the more they feel like they can devote their time, talent, and treasure. I rely heavily on the balance among those three ways of contributing. I focus on valuing people in all kinds of ways and taking an inclusive approach. ▶

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I've never been a top-down, unilateral-decision-making leader. I'm a big fan of a team approach, using the different skill sets of all the amazing people on our board to get the best results. In everything I do for MWPH, I'm driven by a tremendous sense of appreciation for the hospital—it's very personal to me.

### How should people decide which organization to support?

Go with your heart. It has to be personal, because if it's not, it's not going to be a good fit. It must be something you truly believe in because that enthusiasm and that passion is what leads people to join you. Duty and obligation are not enough to take you through the challenges—only strong

belief in the organization's mission will do that.

And, you need people to join you and believe in the cause with you in order to amplify your impact. We've been fortunate to have had a lot of smart, dedicated, and innovative people join us to support MWPH. People like to be part of something successful. With the gala, after a couple of years of success, people wanted to be a part of it and so many others besides me have dedicated themselves to its success.

Finally, don't underestimate the importance of sharing your connection to a cause. Each year I chaired the gala, I spoke about my story. Vulnerability and emotion will have a positive impact, inspiring a volunteer or donor to do more.

## Lauren's 5 ways to turn passion into impact



**Cultivate persistence:** I'm a big believer in having the courage of your convictions and refusing to take "no" for an answer. The gala idea would not have taken off if I hadn't pushed so hard and convinced hospital leadership to give it a try.



**Build a support system:** Surrounding yourself with people who will support you, even when you have a crazy idea, is absolutely key. This applies to people in both professional and personal spheres.



**Sleep on it:** The best answer is not always the first answer. Things move very fast in the world today, but important decisions deserve personal reflection. I find that I make better decisions, and have more confidence in those choices, when I've slept on it.



**Consider the "three Ts":** Evaluate your ability to contribute using the three Ts: time, talent, and treasure. Some people may be able to make a significant financial contribution, but devoting your time and talents to an organization can be just as impactful.



**Go big:** I'd rather place all of my resources into one effort rather than splitting my time and attention among many organizations or causes. It has always made more sense to me to put all of my eggs in one basket and give it my all.

Visit [mwph.org](https://www.mwph.org) to learn more about Lauren's passion.



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