

Hallway of Hope

by Deborah Held

Making his way down the long, straight corridor on his bicycle, 6-year-old **Lucas Olsen** giggles like any other boy his age. His muffled laughter permeates the neighbors' walls in this rectangular building, where the suites all share the common hallway.

An occasional door opens as someone peeks a head out to see who's in the hall today, and they offer up a wave and an encouraging smile.

This is neither an apartment building nor a residence, but an office building, and 114 New Street in Decatur is indeed home to a hallway of hope for children and adults alike.

The passion of the women who rent the space in suite I-2, Decatur Therapy Solutions, spills over daily, not just into the hallway outside the walls of their own suite, but throughout the building that houses half a dozen other Decatur-based businesses.

The peeking heads and smiles come from everyday workers in neighboring suites, who have grown accustomed to the bicycles and scooters making their way down the hall outside their office doors.

Decatur Therapy Solutions is owned by **Janna Morgan**, a physical therapist; **Marla Smith**, a physical therapist; and **Gail Nuse**, the practice's speech language pathologist. Other therapists also share the space, such as physical therapist **Karen Chambers**. Although each therapist is an individual private practitioner, there seems to be no ego involved here. These therapists work together toward a common goal: making the lives of children with developmental delays, challenges or even temporary injuries more functional through their playful rehabilitation methods.

"We are successful because the lines are not strict," said Nuse. "(The therapy) is more eclectic than specific." Patients are seamlessly cared for through a blending of talents in the bright open space that is the inside of suite I-2.

Due to the complexity of the children's issues

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Lucas Olsen, 6, rides a special bike down the hallway of an East Decatur Station office building as part of his physical therapy.



Photos by Travis Hudgons



Physical therapist Janna Morgan chats with Alison DeWitt, mother of Lucas Olsen, as he pedals down the hall.





It's swing time for Pierce Ruck and family. Photos Travis Hudgons

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as well as the beliefs of the therapists, all therapies revolve helping the family of the patient.

"My goal is to help families help themselves, by providing therapeutic support to children and families with special needs," said Morgan. "We try to make the children as functional as possible, allowing them to live and play in their own environment."

"It's the parents that will make the difference," said Nuse, and so a teaching dynamic is vital.

There are no "drop offs" at this clinic. A caretaker or family member is always present to learn how to play with the child.

Why a methodology of play? Because, said Morgan, "children learn through play," a belief the therapists share.

Reverend **Bill Ruck**, father of 5-year-old patient **Pierce**, can attest to the success of this methodology.

"The only way I know how to play with kids is with therapy," he said. "I've been well-trained by four therapists." His other son, **Evin**, 2, is also present at every therapy session. Evin is encouraged to participate in each play activity brother Pierce experiences. In this way he learns how best to play with his special-needs brother, who was born with Down syndrome that left him globally delayed. Pierce is also battling leukemia.

Pierce has been in some form of physical, occupational, music and speech therapy since infancy, yet it was the work of **Karen Chambers** and her colleagues at Decatur Therapy Solutions that brought him to the verge of walking just before he turned 3. He also learned to read.

Unfortunately, there was a bump in the road. "For his third birthday Pierce got cancer," said his father.



Pierce Ruck sits with his brother Evin and dad Bill Ruck in a swing designed to help him balance.

The Ruck family of Stone Mountain faced the fight of Pierce's young life. Today, he still has severe repercussions from complications from the chemotherapy he received, though his health is more stable, and he is now in "maintenance remission," according to his dad.

As soon as Pierce's system was strong enough to come back to the clinic, the physical therapists were ready and waiting with their play therapy. With them Pierce read books, sang and worked on his balance in part by sitting on a huge swing and rocking gently back and forth.

Just recently, Pierce got up and walked – not to Chambers, but rather away from her after she unknowingly made him angry. Miffed, Pierce took his first ever steps, pulling himself up and walking right over to Smith, who had her arms wide open as an invitation. It's a memory everyone celebrates – a victory for Pierce, his family, the other patients and their families, and of course, for the Decatur Therapy Solutions staff.

"It's like big family here," said **Suzanne Vaden**, mother of patient **Jack**. "You get to know everybody here."

Jack comes to the clinic once a week to work with Smith, the physical therapist, who covers him with kisses throughout his hour-long



Jack Vaden, 4, doesn't look too happy while working with therapist Marla Smith.



Physical therapist Marla Smith guides A.J., 11, as he works out on a balance board.

strengthening session while mom and 7-year-old sister **Morgan** look on and take a break from their chronic care-taking duties.

Now 4, Jack was diagnosed with "failure to thrive" at 3 months of age. He is completely non-verbal, and he cannot walk or roll over. Officially diagnosed with mitochondrial disease, Jack is also blind.

He expresses himself subtly through facial expressions and laughter, and sometimes through the simple tapping of a foot, though his mom remains unconvinced that he expresses emotions at all. Nonetheless, Smith does not despair, and has recently taught Jack to sit up.

While Smith will continue to work with Jack, part of her job, and the job of all the therapists, is to work within the confines of reality. In Jack's case, this means acceptance of what will be life-long limitations.

"That's the hardest part – dealing with difficult conversations that parents may or may not be ready to hear," said Chambers.

Until that time and beyond, these therapists come to their clinic daily (each on her own schedule), always "on" and happy to see their patients,



Christian radio rallies against Fairness Doctrine

By Nigel Roberts

Imagine tuning to one's favorite conservative Christian radio talk show. The radio personality, with a resolute but not angry tone, points to several Scriptures during his 30-minute broadcast that denounces abortion as a sin. "After a short break," he says with a hint of dismay, "we'll now hear an opposing viewpoint on abortion."

That scenario may not be too far fetched in the near future. Conservative religious broadcasters fear that a Democratic majority in Washington will resurrect a policy, called the Fairness Doctrine, which would force them to air opposing views on controversial matters—from the sanctity of life issues to whether same-sex couples should be allowed to adopt.

Although it never carried the force of law, the Fairness Doctrine was an FCC regulation from 1949 that enforced balanced viewpoints on the nation's airwaves. The justification at that time was that only a few big companies controlled mass communication, and in the interest of democracy, the FCC compelled them to give those with opposing political perspectives the free opportunity to have their voices heard by a wide audience.

But by the 1980s, with the explosion of cable television and radio stations, there was no need to force broadcasters to share their programming time with opponents. Consequently, Reagan-era deregulation led to the demise of the Fairness Doctrine.

Rep. **Nancy Pelosi** (D – Ca-

lif.), speaker of the house, stirred up a hornet's nest recently when she signaled support of the revival of the Fairness Doctrine. She also said that the House would not entertain a Republican bill that would permanently kill the defunct FCC rule.

Under the old Fairness Doctrine, broadcasters had to offer one-third of the airtime it devoted to expressing a controversial opinion free to opponents so they could express their view on the same subject. Fifty years later, social conservatives find two aspects of the 1949 rule particularly troubling: The religious right dominates the radio airwaves and would be disproportionately affected. And, compared to a half-century ago, Christian views face a myriad of competitors—from atheists to a diverse range of other religious voices.

American Center for Law & Justice (ACLJ), a Christian-based free speech and religious liberties organization, issued a statement saying that the re-instatement of the Fairness Doctrine would be "devastating" to Christian broadcasters because the federal government would dictate what views they could air.

"As you all know, it is critical for Christian broadcast outlets to be able to discuss the controversial issues of the day—whether we're talking about defending the sanctity of human life or the issue of same-sex marriage," the statement said. "The proposal is more than troubling—we believe it is completely unnecessary and un-

constitutional. There are plenty of broadcast opportunities available for competing viewpoints to be expressed. We don't need the government telling us what we have to discuss and how to discuss it."

According to the Christian Coalition, those who want to reinstate the Fairness Doctrine know that the law would "intimidate radio station owners not to carry hours of conservative talk (because they would have to offer hours of liberal talk)—meaning shows like **Rush Limbaugh**, **Sean Hannity** and **Bill O'Reilly** would be a thing of the past." The organization added that conservative talk radio is "one of the biggest obstacles" that blocks the "radical liberal agenda."

Roberta Combs, chairwoman of the Christian Coalition, announced that her organization has begun an online campaign to ensure that neither the incoming **Barack Obama** administration nor the Democratic-led Congress would resurrect the FCC rule.

Since its demise in 1987, Congress attempted to revive the Fairness Doctrine two times. But in both cases, Presidents **Ronald Reagan** and **George H.W. Bush** vetoed the bills.

But with a Democratic president and Congress in Washington, conservatives are working to head off any new attempt to re-instate it. Rep. **Mike Pence** (R - Ind.) spearheaded the Broadcaster Freedom Act of 2009, which has garnered support from other conservative Republicans. Still, concerns persist.

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excited by even the most subtle headway made by these children.

"I feel satisfied at the end of every day," said Nuse.

The therapists agree that therapy is not the be-all, end-all answer that so many parents and siblings of children in need of long-term physical and speech therapy are seeking. While some children who have suffered playground accidents and broken bones, for example, will progress back to their own "normal," the majority of the patients at Decatur Therapy Solutions have ongoing issues such as global delay, autism, Down syndrome and other, undiagnosed, developmental and motor issues.

Next week, when the play therapy at Decatur Therapy Solutions spills out of its walls and back down the hall with Lucas on his bicycle, there will be more laughter and words of encouragement pervading the neighboring offices. A passerby will smile and wave, and a little bit of lighthearted energy will breakup the monotony of the workday.

For Lucas and his family, as well as the therapist helping to guide his specially designed bicycle down the corridor, cruising the hallway is a major feat. Lucas cannot walk or even crawl, according to Morgan, but now, she says, he can pedal his bike all the way down the long hall with almost no assistance, thanks to the strength and range of motion he has built up in his lower extremities. It's a far cry from the days when Morgan had to push the bike herself with Lucas propped on its seat. It's also a huge step closer to the ultimate goal of the staff behind this clinic—enabling a child to play in an age-appropriate way within his own community, thanks to the safety provided by a controlled work space on New Street.

Decatur Therapy Solutions has no Web site nor a direct phone number. Therapists take cases based on current caseload through physician referrals. Most insurance is accepted, including Medicaid, Medicare and Babies Can't Wait.

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Poitier on the show. They were talking about his book *The Measure of a Man*. I love that book; it made me think of my life differently, so I sent an e-mail to the show telling them that.

The next day much to my surprise I heard from one of the show's producers. We talked about my book club mentoring program at the high school where I was working. She asked if I could present that book. I called the principal and said I needed 30 copies of the book right away. I had no idea how my students would respond to it, but we had some really interesting discussions. It turned out that out of 30 young men only five had father figures in their lives.

One day I came to school and there was a camera crew in the library and all my boys were there. Oprah had selected me to go on her show and invited me to dinner with her and Sidney Poitier. We talked for about three hours over dinner. She really understands what it takes to be an advocate for youth.