

FISCAL YEAR 2021

# Annual Report

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BRINGING SUPPORT,  
COMPASSION AND HOPE  
TO FAMILIES IN A YEAR  
LIKE NO OTHER







# FISCAL YEAR 2021 Annual Report



## OUR MISSION

To provide emotional, financial, and advocacy support for children with life-threatening illnesses and their families, in order to help keep them stable, functioning, and able to cope.

## FOUNDER

Sheila Petersen  
(1938-1990)

## BOARD OF DIRECTORS

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Friends of Karen is a registered 501 (c) (3) charity established in 1978. All contributions are tax-deductible.

# A Word of Thanks



When Sheila Petersen founded Friends of Karen 43 years ago, she couldn't have anticipated that the very DNA of this organization would be perfectly suited to helping the families we serve weather the COVID-19 pandemic. The fact that we support families emotionally and financially through the nightmare of their child's illness, uniquely prepared us to respond to the challenges faced by these fragile families. Still, by all measures, the past year tested our resilience like no other.

We're proud to report that even at the height of the pandemic Friends of Karen continued to provide crucial assistance to hundreds of vulnerable families in the New York metro area without interruption. Our remarkable staff adapted our many services and programs during the COVID-19 crisis. Moreover, they developed new supports for needs that emerged among the children and families at this doubly difficult time.

One initiative addressed how illness has affected self esteem in teen girls. A new online group encouraged leadership and reflection among the teens through team-building and art therapy activities. A "Friends Having Fun" group was developed to offer a respite for parents and activities for ill children and siblings sheltering in place. It continues to be popular with families. Newly-initiated English and Spanish language bereavement groups are filling a void for parents who have lost a child to illness at this particularly hard time. These are the silver linings that punctuate a year unlike any other in recent memory.

Many people helped Friends of Karen navigate these tough months intact and productively. Our Board of Directors, through their governance and fiduciary oversight, assured that staff had the resources to carry out the organization's important mission.

Our social workers, child life specialists and art therapists transitioned to on-line interaction with children and parents. While not a substitute for home or hospital visits, they are using technology effectively until they can safely meet in-person again. Our development professionals quickly learned to host virtual events and carried out a robust fundraising agenda to sustain FoK's essential services.

Your generosity and caring is the glue that has kept Friends of Karen going strong. We did not know whether we would have the resources to carry on at the start of the pandemic, but your outpouring of good-will uplifted and inspired us through every challenge we faced.

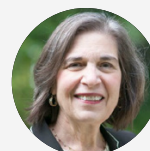
We are as committed as ever to Friends of Karen's life-changing mission. With a motivated staff, a dedicated Board of Directors, devoted volunteers and you, the sky is the limit for what we can accomplish. Together, we ensure a vital lifeline is available for New York area families caring for a critically ill child.

There is no other organization like Friends of Karen, with our history, experience and compassion to help families stay stable, functioning and able to cope through their child's health emergency. Thank you for standing with us throughout the pandemic and helping Friends of Karen thrive in our new normal.



*Paul Smadbeck*

**PAUL SMADBECK**  
Board President



*Judith Factor*

**JUDITH FACTOR**  
Executive Director



## FAMILY SPOTLIGHT

# Finding Help in a Time of Need

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“Muhammad was just five years old when he was diagnosed with leukemia. I had given birth to his little brother Muhammad Hamza just two months before his diagnosis. Muhammad Hamza was a little baby and he needed me at that age. I worried how my husband Touffiq and I would have enough time to care for the baby and take care of Muhammad.

We saw that our whole life was changing. We no longer thought about ourselves. We were now focused on Muhammad’s treatment and his getting better. I am grateful that the hospital social worker told us about Friends of Karen.

Our Friends of Karen social worker Jackie spoke with us about what we were going through and what would help us be less stressed. They helped us pay rent, electric bills and paid for the daycare to take care of our youngest. That was hard because I had no experience with daycare, and I worried about my little one. But, I knew we needed the help.

As much as we needed help, it was really hard to ask for it. Then you realize that anyone can end up in this situation because of a serious illness. Jackie and Friends of Karen helped us in ways that a family member might help. Most of all, they gave us hope our life could get back to the way it was before. That wasn’t always easy as COVID-19 meant we had to do so many things differently.

They also did things that lifted our mood. It was so nice that they provided tickets for us to go on a sailboat ride during the summer. It was our first time on a sailboat, and we really enjoyed it and felt happy out on the water. Friends of Karen sent the boys back to school supplies, birthday gifts and gifts for the holidays.

Right now things are a bit calmer as Muhammad is now seven years old and in the maintenance phase of his leukemia treatment. Our family really appreciates that Friends of Karen is always there for us, including staying in touch even now.”

**- Muhammad’s Mother**





## FAMILY SPOTLIGHT

# Finding Comfort from a Familiar Friend

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It seems incomprehensible that a baby could have cancer, but Briany had rhabdomyosarcoma, a soft tissue cancer, when she was just nine months old. Now, imagine beating cancer as a baby and then facing it again in 2020 as a teenager. That rollercoaster existence would take a toll on any young person and his or her family.

“Even though we had gone through her cancer when Briany was a baby, this time became tougher when we learned where the cancer was, in her bladder, and that the doctor was not optimistic all of it could be removed,” Briany’s mother Lucy noted. “Thankfully, I already knew Friends of Karen from when Briany was sick as a baby.”

Lucy had been referred to Friends of Karen all those years ago by the hospital social worker, who recognized that when Lucy had to leave her job to be with Briany at her bedside, she would need financial help. At that time, Lucy and Briany’s father also had her teenage siblings Bryant and Katherine at home. She recalls how much it meant that Friends of Karen helped then with the rent and sent gifts to Briany and her brother and sister.

With this new illness came new challenges for this Brooklyn family. Now, Briany was sick during her teen years, while a pandemic raged, and when her beloved

stepdad Manuel was temporarily living in Mexico – all of which added new complications and anxiety for the family. Lucy was fortunate that her civilian job at the New York Police Department allowed the flexibility for her to work some days and be with Briany when she went through surgery and chemotherapy.

“I am so grateful for how Friends of Karen helped in so many ways,” Lucy said. “Our social worker Rhonda and her intern Bridget made sure we had help to pay for our rent and our car, and that Briany worked with Siobhan, the sibling support specialist. Briany asks ‘why me’ and has to deal with feeling different from other kids her age. I saw *Mi Princessa* who always was smiling feeling really down. Siobhan was able to work with her and talk to her, and it is good when I see her happy and getting through the struggle.”

What Lucy most appreciates is that Briany is now in remission, and that Friends of Karen was always there for their family during her treatment.

“I know life would have been even worse without Friends of Karen,” Lucy reflected. “On top of worrying about the physical and mental health of my child and being able to pay our bills, you worry when nobody is there to tell you everything is going to be fine. We thank God that Friends of Karen always lets us know they are here for us and helps us in the ways we need.”

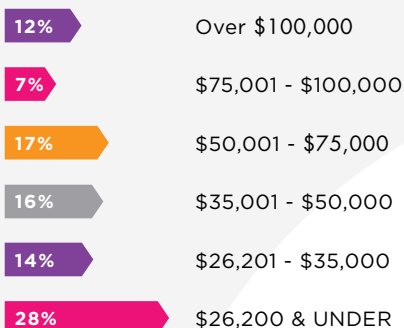


# A LOOK AT Families Served in Fiscal Year 2021



Friends of Karen provides Family Support Services to any child with a life-threatening illness, and their family, that meets our guidelines. Our work embraces diversity as a core value that represents inclusiveness, mutual respect, multiple perspectives, and serves as a means to achieving health equity. We provide services that consider family members' experiences and circumstances, including their socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity, language, nationality, sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, religion, geography, disability and age.

## FAMILY INCOME



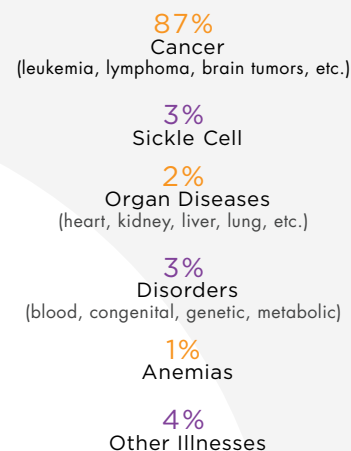
The Federal guideline for poverty level is \$26,200 for a family of 4.

\* 6% Unknown

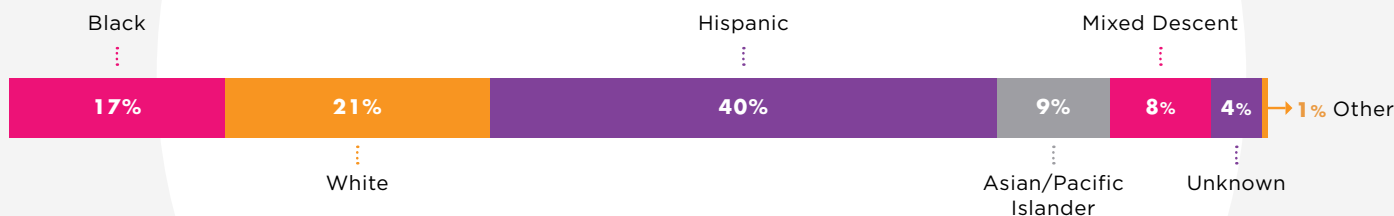
## AGE OF ILL CHILD



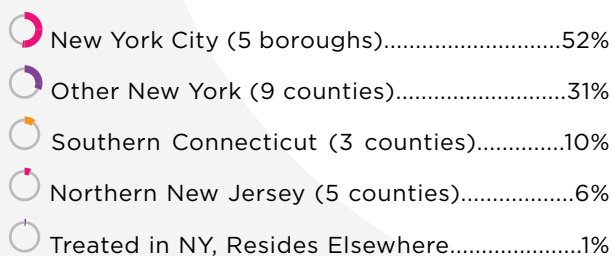
## ILLNESSES



## ETHNICITY



## RESIDENCE



## FAMILY STRUCTURE



36% of Friends of Karen families are single-parent households



## A YEAR LIKE NO OTHER

# Notable Numbers for Fiscal Year 2021



\$1,202,634

The amount spent covering family bills for medical expenses, hospital travel, and basic costs of living for housing, utilities, internet and food.



\$48,300

The amount spent on clothing for children, a new category of assistance that was added during the COVID-19 pandemic.



16,987

The total number of children that Friends of Karen has helped since our founding in 1978.



1,320

The number of children whose lives we have touched through emotional, financial and advocacy support in FY21.



848

The number of children that received holiday gift cards from our generous donors to the annual Adopt-a-Family program.



790

The number of children who received birthday gifts and birthday cards. We want birthdays to be happy and celebrated even in the midst of illness and COVID-19.



483

The number of children who received gift cards for school supplies and clothes through our COVID-19 modified annual Back-to-School program.



311

The average number of families Friends of Karen assisted each month.



177

The number of ill children and siblings receiving one-on-one support from our Child Life Specialists and Creative Arts Therapists.



137%

The percentage increase in dollars we provided in food assistance during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic.



117

The number of Arts Bags provided to children for Sibling Support sessions and online group fun activities like Connect and Create!, Siblings Week and Friends Having Fun.



17

The number of hospitals we partner with that have a pediatric oncology department and/or pediatric transplant unit. Among them are,

Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center, Yale-New Haven Children's Hospital, Cohen Children's Medical Center/Northwell, Maria Fareri Children's Hospital, Children's Hospital of New Jersey, and NewYork-Presbyterian Morgan Stanley Children's Hospital



1

How it all began in 1978... with one child, Karen MacInnes, and one caring neighbor, Sheila Petersen.



## FAMILY SPOTLIGHT

# How Illness Impacted Their Lives



*Rossy was three years old when she was diagnosed with leukemia. Rossy, now five, finished her treatment during the summer of 2021. Her mother Maria and sister Sherlyn, 12, shared the impact of her illness on them and how Friends of Karen helped their family.*

**After you learned that Rossy had cancer, what did you worry about most?**

**Mom:** I took Rossy to the ER for a fever, and then suddenly they tell me she has cancer. I was in shock, and my biggest fear was that she would die. The first couple of weeks I worried about Rossy and my daughter Sherlyn who had to stay at a friend's house because of everything going on. We are always together, and now I had to trust someone else to care for her. I wished I could split myself in two to be with both of them.

**Sherlyn:** My mom's friend gave me the news when I was staying with them. When she told me that Rossy was diagnosed with cancer, I couldn't believe it. It is very scary to hear the word "cancer," and I was so afraid. I thought Rossy was going to die. I worried most about the treatment, how long it would last, and how Rossy would do.

**How has Rossy's illness changed your daily life?**

**Sherlyn:** Rossy's life has changed the most. She had to take medication and keep her chemotherapy port clean, go to the clinic and suffer through treatment. After the diagnosis, when Rossy came back home, she couldn't play or be around other kids. She was always in a bad mood, cranky, and wanting to be alone all the time. On the days she went to the clinic she cried because she was afraid of the needles. I went to the clinic with her several times. Sometimes, I was allowed to sleep over at the hospital and it was so hard to see her suffer. I wanted to change places with her. I always wanted to protect Rossy. She is my baby sister. I worried so much about my sister and my mom. Even at school things changed. I couldn't concentrate.

**How did you find out about Friends of Karen?**

**Mom:** The doctors told me that I had to stay home to care for Rossy. At that moment, I didn't care about money, bills, or work. I remember thinking I don't know how I'm going to do this - keep paying my rent and feed my kids. I just knew I must stay home. Eventually, the hospital social worker told me about Friends of Karen.

**What has Friends of Karen done that has meant the most to your family?**

**Sherlyn:** One of the things I will never forget is when Friends of Karen sent me a new laptop. Mine wasn't working, and I desperately needed it for school work, and to be able to video chat with mom and Rossy at the hospital. During a phone conversation with our social worker Natalia, she offered the assistance and a few days later the box arrived. I couldn't believe it; no one does things like that.

**Mom:** For me everything about Friends of Karen was unexpected. I never imagined they would help me with so many things, like the rent, food, and cell phone. They always thought about everything. Every year they sent back-to-school supplies; winter jackets, gloves, hats; and a gift card to purchase clothes. When you think about not being able to go back to work for months or years, it's unbelievable to think that someone cares and understands, and most important, is willing to help.

**What do you think would have happened if you had not been helped by Friends of Karen?**

**Mom:** I don't know what would have happened if Friends of Karen didn't assist my family during this ordeal. Their help allowed me to be with my family when we needed each other the most.

**Sherlyn:** It gave me peace of mind that Friends of Karen was going to help my mom. It is very scary to know that your mom won't be able to work, but Friends of Karen always helped us. They have been with us the entire time, and, because of that, my mom was able to be with Rossy and make sure she got better.



## SOCIAL WORKER SPOTLIGHT

# Our Commitment to Assist Diverse Families



"It's almost nine years since I started to work at Friends of Karen, and there are no two similar days of work. Working at Friends of Karen has been the highlight of my career. From very early on when I was studying psychology back in my country, I wanted to work with families.

Growing up in Colombia, I never planned on moving to New York. But, as I was getting ready to start my professional life, I was forced to travel to the USA for safety and became an immigrant. Out of the blue, I had to start to build a new life all over again. Eventually, I got a Master of Social Work degree, and my interest in family work increased.

The families we help at Friends of Karen have a child whose diagnosis can evolve into unimaginable financial, emotional, and social stress. It is a privilege to be part of the social work team helping these families.

I see my role at Friends of Karen as an advocate for those in the middle of an already complicated situation confronting these terrible illnesses that put their child's life at risk. At Friends of Karen, we work with families of all different backgrounds, and I work mainly with those whose first language is Spanish. Our team of social workers knows from experience how to help families by using a multicultural approach as an integral part of our work.

For the families, life changes immediately after receiving the diagnosis, and thinking about how to pay the bills should be the least of their worries. I like that we do concrete things for families. That begins with knowing that parents' time with their children is the most important thing of all, and it's our job to make that possible.

The financial assistance we provide throughout the treatment is tangible and allows parents to focus on their child's numerous medical needs. The social work team also provides emotional support to every member of the household as they navigate one of the worst and most stressful events in their life. We sustain the families so, when their child's treatment ends, they can face the future with more stability. I feel proud knowing no other organization does all that.

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic made things even harder for our families. As the world turned upside down for everyone, for these families it became harder and more stressful. But, we were there by their side every step of the way. We called, Zoomed, FaceTimed, coordinated, educated, and advocated to ensure the families and their children were safe, had food, a roof over their head, clothes to wear, cell phone and electricity, and transportation.

Even though it wasn't safe to be with the families in their home or the hospital, they never felt less supported. We hope for the return of those visits soon. Being able to meet one-on-one is what makes Friends of Karen unique - the human connection, the face-to-face conversation, the human touch. When a family we support is stable, it helps their neighborhood, their community - it's all tied together."

- Natalia RossEcheverri LMSW, C- ASWCM

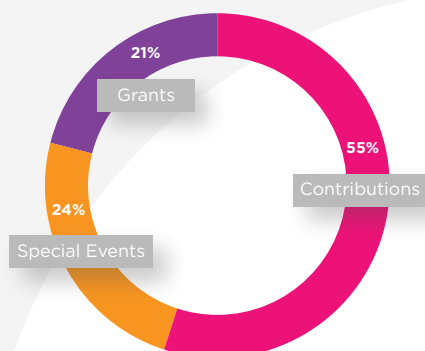


FISCAL YEAR 2021 APRIL 1, 2020 – MARCH 31, 2021

# Financial Summary



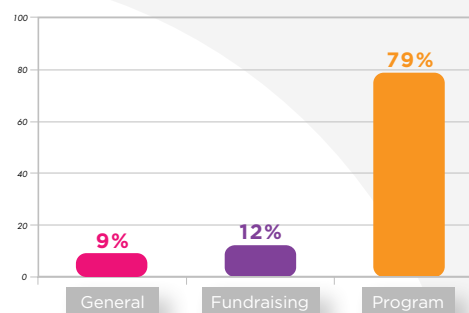
## Total Support & Revenue



## Support and Revenue

Contributions (from individuals, businesses, etc.).....	\$1,964,262
Special Events (Net of Direct Costs).....	\$878,899
Grants.....	\$771,185
<b>Total Operating Revenue.....</b>	<b>\$3,614,346</b>

## Total Operating Expenses



## Operating Expenses

Program Services.....	\$3,010,880
Management and General.....	\$336,720
Fundraising.....	\$464,334
<b>Total Operating Expenses.....</b>	<b>\$3,811,934</b>
Change in Net Assets Before Other Changes.....	\$(197,588)
Investment Return.....	\$1,053,218
<b>Change in Net Assets.....</b>	<b>\$855,630</b>
Net Assets Beginning Of Year.....	\$4,783,032
Net Assets End of Year.....	\$5,638,662

**MANAGEMENT & GENERAL (9%):** The areas of the organization that enable the Family Support Program to meet the urgent needs of the families we serve, and Friends of Karen as a whole to operate.

**FUNDRAISING (12%):** Our comprehensive services for families are made possible by our donors and funders. Our fundraising efforts work to maximize the dollars directed to the Family Support Program.

**PROGRAM SERVICES (79%):** Friends of Karen is the only organization that provides comprehensive financial and psychosocial support and advocacy to families in the New York Tri-State region caring for a child battling cancer or another life-threatening illness. This assistance is provided at no cost to families, who receive these services from diagnosis through treatment.

“As the sole pediatric palliative care physician, I have had the up close and personal experience of suffering made easier by Friends of Karen. They have the generosity of heart and foresight to really understand the experience of critical illness and ease burdens with such skill. They have the history and tradition at Friends of Karen to treat each family as they would a dear friend – always available, supportive and offering love through service.”

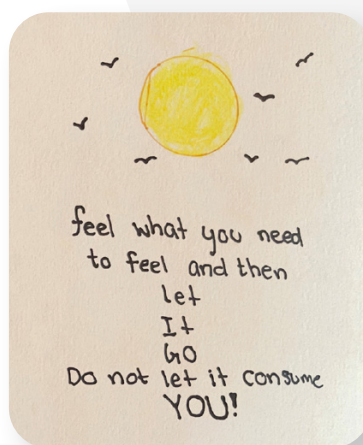
- Sarah Norris, M.D., M.Ed.  
Children's Hospital at Montefiore



# CREATIVE SHOWCASE

## Sibling Art

This gallery of art work was produced through children's work with our certified Child Life Specialists and Licensed Creative Arts Therapists. These skilled and compassionate professionals help siblings, from age five through the teens, to communicate and cope with their feelings about their brother's or sister's illness.







**Headquarters**  
118 Titicus Road  
North Salem, NY 10560  
(914) 277-4547

**New York City**  
217 West 18th Street, Unit 2015  
New York, NY 10011  
(212) 308-1378

**Long Island**  
150 Broadhollow Road, Ste 112  
Melville, NY 11747  
(631) 473-1768