

## **2025 Distinguished Service Award Winner: Debbie Wagers, CCLS, MS, Creator of ONE VOICE**

*Laura Takeuchi, CCLS, MPA*

As a child life practitioner of thirty years and the creator of ONE VOICE, Debbie Wagers, MHA, CCLS exemplifies what it means to provide distinguished and unparalleled service to the profession, colleagues, and patients. She has the remarkable ability to identify needs and gaps in patient care and produce wide-reaching solutions that are grounded in psychosocial theory and practice while recognizing the power of collaboration.

In her early days as a child life specialist, Debbie worked on pediatric wards and in clinics, serving children, adolescents, and their families- including children of hospitalized adults. She quickly identified a passion for child life education, playing an integral role in establishing the Child Life Internship Program at University of Nebraska Medical Center in 2004, where she went on to serve as the Internship Coordinator for seventeen years. She also taught the Child Life in Hospitals Course at UNMC for eight years, supporting countless child life learners. As a mentor, her colleagues describe her approach as whole-hearted: "Debbie gives herself fully to helping others realize their dreams in child life while continuing to stay true to herself, cultivating her own passion, and giving back to the child life field," says Shannon Vaccaro, MS, CCLS, Debbie's first student in her Child Life in Healthcare Course who later interned under her.

Debbie's three decades of contributions to child life span across multiple disciplines and have significantly influenced how hospitals and healthcare providers approach pediatric care. This is exemplified by her ground-breaking development of ONE VOICE in 1996, a comprehensive program designed to educate healthcare professionals to provide an emotionally safe environment, thus reducing the incidence of emotional trauma to children, families and staff. The program teaches hospital staff to unify and streamline communication and support for families through child life intervention techniques. ONE VOICE is now recognized both nationally and internationally and officially implemented in over 200 U.S. hospitals and in five countries worldwide. The impact of ONE VOICE is difficult to measure, but almost any child life specialist you ask of the thousands in the field is familiar with the program.

As co-creator of Reimagine Well, an immersive education program using virtual reality to prepare children for radiation and MRI procedures, Debbie continues to demonstrate innovation and build relationships with peers to enhance patient and family experience. She provides input to Reimagine Well's creative team and, drawing on her passion for education, advises other child life clinicians on the rollout of their VR programs. Her work with Reimagine Well has been integral to studying how VR can impact patient experience, decrease in anesthesia, and institutional savings while executing interventions that alleviate fear and anxiety. A 2016-2017 study conducted at UNMC found that when children completing radiation therapy were prepared by child life specialists using Reimagine Well's Virtual Environment for Radiotherapy Training the mean age of patients requiring anesthesia decreased from 5 to 2.7 years old.

Outside of the hospital, Debbie's work speaks to her personal commitment to serving children and families while growing the profession. She holds more than 21 years of involvement as counselor and program director at Camp CoHoLo, a summer camp for kids with cancer and blood disorders; her work at the camp, combined with her professional accomplishments, reflects her deep commitment to the holistic care of children. When COVID-19 cancelled camp, Debbie forged on and created an online camp experience for the patients to meet their needs for socialization from their homes. Debbie has been instrumental in the development of local and national disaster response programs for children. She founded the Child Life Disaster Relief team in Omaha, and her efforts to recruit child life specialists in Des Moines led to the creation of a network providing critical support to children and families in Iowa and Nebraska during emergencies. Recently, Wagers was called upon to help CLDR with training initiatives and to expand their reach nationwide. Her leadership extends to the Association of Child Life Professionals, where she has served on the Education and Training Committee, including as chair in the past few years. She also attended the ACLP Internship Think Tank, helping to advance the standards and practices of child life internships across the field.

Most recently, Debbie has continued her impactful work in child life at the Child Life Supervisor at Boys Town National Research Hospital. Since her arrival in 2021, she has increased staffing by 53%, allowing for expanded coverage throughout the hospital. She also introduced a full-time clinic position focused on comfort positions and pain management during needle procedures. Debbie spearheaded the Boys Town CARES© Initiative (Comfort positions, Alleviate pain, Refocus attention, Environment, Soothing techniques), an emotional safety program that continues to develop and implement strategies for emotional safety in healthcare.

Anyone asked about working with Debbie will start with a smile and chuckle. She keeps her co-workers on her toes through inside jokes ("Whoa!") and is a sounding board and listening ear for them during a difficult day. As a supervisor, she supports her peers each day and works alongside them to provide a positive work environment. Nicknamed "Little Miss Debbie Sunshine," she brings in humor and fun to her team as a means to balance the heaviness of providing care to children and families in some of their most difficult times. Her positive outlook can be observed in a recent [blog post](#): "I believe with all my heart that we are the ones who are blessed by each and every child and family member we meet. We get to be first-hand witnesses to love, the dedication, the sacrifices and strength of families (and) truly learn something from all of them that helps us provide even better care to the next child and family."

Debbie's legacy is a testament to her dedication, compassion, and determination to change the landscape of pediatric care for the better with a collective effort from people in and outside of hospital walls. Her sincere love for each of the patients and families that she has crossed paths with over the past decades leaves an impression in heart and mind and shows in her work.