

Game Changers: Masks for Kids

When Karen Udoh, second-year University of Louisville School of Medicine (ULSOM) student and President of the Student National Medical Association (SNMA), heard about a new initiative to provide face masks for children, she knew instantly this was something she wanted to be involved in.

During her year as President, she has been working to create relationships between the health care community and the community of Louisville as well as partnering with local organizations on various projects. SNMA members previously worked on another project with local activist Christopher 2X when he approached Karen about his Game Changers: Masks for Kids program after one of his own grandchildren had had a COVID-19 scare.

“He felt like the conversation around COVID-19 had not been focused on the kids at all. If you go to different stores, you don’t see parents putting a mask on their kids at all,” she said. “We designed this campaign to really amplify the issue and address kids in the conversation. We also want to make it a long-term thing, not just talking about social distancing and wearing masks, but also talking about vaccinations when kids are able to be vaccinated.”

From there, the SNMA and the UofL Department of Pediatrics joined forces and began work on a series of public service announcements to get the word out. Rebecca Buster, a second-year ULSOM student, and Dr. Daniel Blatt, Assistant Professor of Pediatrics in the Division of Pediatric Infectious Diseases at UofL and Norton Children’s Hospital, were quick to join the team and represent the medical community alongside Karen.

“I was so happy to be able to help in any way that I can. It’s a situation where circumstance turned into opportunity to help,” Dr. Blatt said. “The whole country is faced with this pandemic and that’s the circumstance that creates a need. It’s our duty as medical professionals to help people in need.”

For Rebecca, she sees her role as a “big kid” important in explaining to kids that everyone should be wearing masks.

“For me, being able to share the message and show kids that even people who look like ‘grown ups’ like they assume Karen and I are, we’re still in school and we still have to wear masks,” she said. “We’re just trying to relate to kids, and show them that everybody needs to wear masks, and we all need to work together to fix this.”



The campaign launched with two PSA videos featuring Dr. Blatt, Karen and Rebecca as well as Christopher 2X's grandchildren. The kids were able to ask questions about why it's important to wear masks and how to encourage others to wear a mask, and received tips to stay healthy such as washing hands and social distancing, in addition to wearing masks.

Soon after the campaign launched, companies and organizations from around the community began generously donating masks to the cause, with a total now over 240,000 masks (and continuing to grow). These donations will be crucial for when schools open back up, as Karen noted that many students and schools do not have the same resources and that these donations will allow students access to a mask they might not have otherwise.



While this campaign is targeted at children, it's also speaking to their parents and families. By speaking directly to the children, however, this is allowing the youngest members of our community to serve as teachers and role models.

"Kids are really smart and they're practical. They can see that wearing a mask is keeping their friends and family safe," Dr. Blatt said. "By us allowing them to have that mask, they then become their own role models for other kids and adults. They're really good ambassadors for public health."

Moving forward, Rebecca said that she hopes this campaign reignites the fire in people to continue to wear masks at all ages and in the long-term, to consider getting the vaccine when it becomes available.

"There are so many hesitations that people are facing because it is a new thing. With the vaccine, the fear is understandable," Rebecca said. "If you're not comfortable getting the vaccine, how about a mask? It's a way to keep lowering the spread until they're comfortable with the vaccine."

The goal of this campaign is simple, Dr. Blatt said, and we must all work together to eradicate the disease so that we may return to a sense of normalcy.

"The whole goal of this campaign is to stop people from dying. That's the ultimate goal," Dr. Blatt said. "The way to stop people from dying is to have everyone buy in, including kids. And not only do children need to buy in because they can transmit the virus and they're getting sick themselves, but they inspire other people to buy in and they inspire other people to do the right thing."