

Galens Tag Days:

A Tradition of Student Generosity and Concern for the Community That Goes Back More Than 70 Years

by Megan Schimpf



Megan Schimpf is a third-year student in the Medical School from East Lansing. She earned her undergraduate degree, a bachelor of science in biology, from the University of Michigan in 1997. She was on the staff of the Michigan Daily for six years, including one year as a news editor, and two and a half years as an editorial columnist. She earned a Gold Circle Award from the Columbia Scholastic Press Association in 1998 for her column on her experiences as a student in the anatomy lab. She is vice president of the Galens Medical Society and has provided support for the Galens' Smoker for the past two years, helping with the writing of the script and design of the program and the scrapbook.

The idea for what has become the Galens' Tag Days was first suggested by Galens member Wall W. Thom at the group's meeting on November 3, 1927. Funds from the first drive were used for a December party for the children in University Hospital, and a portion was saved to found the Galens Workshop the next spring.

The Workshop, which still exists, offers pediatric patients the opportunity to be more "kid" than patient. Held on the eighth floor of Mott Hospital since the mid-1960s, the Workshop offers events ranging from art projects to Halloween costumes, from parades to parties, from face painting to visits by Michigan collegiate athletes.

Its activities always bring smiles and laughter from Mott patients, which is why hundreds of medical students are willing to give up a weekend every year to collect money to support the Workshop and other activities.

The appearance of Galens members in their red ponchos, standing on Ann Arbor street corners with their buckets on the first weekend in December, is a familiar sight to local residents. "It's Galens time again," people say, either preparing to drop coins or paper bills into the buckets or flashing a tag to show they already did. The trademark red and green tags can be seen on almost every winter coat in

town that weekend, proud symbols of wanting to help the children of Washtenaw County.

Tag Days is truly one of the highlights of the Galens year. "There is nothing like the sight of 150 medical students in their red ponchos creating a dynamic presence throughout the city," says Tag Days "czar" Amanda Bauer, a fourth-year student. "When I see thousands of Ann Arborites wearing their colorful tags, I feel a sense of pride and accomplishment knowing the community is with us in our mission."



Despite the long hours and the often frigid weather, most members come away from the weekend with warm stories to tell — that of the man who gave a hundred-dollar bill, that of the toddler with a few coins, that of the





Red poncho-clad Galens members Elise Georgi (top), Ron Teed (middle) and Shannon Sullivan (bottom) during the 1999 Galens Tag Days, juxtaposed with earlier Tag Days scenes from the Galens photo archives.



check for \$500, that of the young woman who benefited from Tag Days money as a child, that of the woman who gives money yearly in honor of her father, that of the van with warm food and drinks, that of the personal appreciation

expressed for the amount of money collected to help kids.

Financial allocation has also changed since the beginning of Tag Days, with fund distributions also being made to outside groups beginning in the mid-1960s. In 1968, Galens pledged \$80,000 to Mott Hospital over 10-12 years for the creation of the Galens Intensive Care Unit for Children. In 1982, however, it was decided that all distributions should be for one year only, and a number of guidelines for giving out Tag Days money were set up — to benefit children younger than 18 in

Washtenaw County and for specific projects to organizations that have exhausted all other sources.

“Galens teaches students important skills in community service and fundraising, about making hard decisions using scarce resources,” says Rachel Glick, M.D., associate dean for student programs and clinical assistant professor of psychiatry, who was a Galens member as a student. “It creates a wonderful teaching and learning opportunity for students who choose to join.”

While the first Galens Tag Days raised about \$1,000, the 1999 Tag Days collected more than \$72,000, augmented by a mail solicitation to alumni/ae, faculty and friends who had made gifts

in the past. A large allocation is given every year to Child Life Services at Mott Hospital, but other organizations helping children in Washtenaw County are encouraged to apply for funds as well. Recent allocations have benefited children’s programs at the Hands-On Museum, the Corner Health Center in Ypsilanti, Ozone House, Hope Clinic and the SOS Community Crisis Center.

“Think about this — if you have \$10 to give away, it doesn’t feel like much to aid the children of Washtenaw County. But when you donate that money to Galens, you become part of a larger entity that is really making a difference in children’s lives. Your \$10 feels like more because you are part of the \$2,000 that went toward the new playground at the low-income child care center,” says third-year medical student Victoria Jewell, a three-year Galens member. “I think that Galens promotes the giving spirit in the community by showing people that every little bit helps. Even if you can’t give as much as you would like to, you are still making a difference.” [m](#)