

# PITTSBURGH BUSINESS TIMES

Richard Cerilli

## **Personalities of Pittsburgh: Variety - the Children's Charity's Charlie LaVallee**

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*Charlie LaVallee is one of the best-known nonprofit leaders in western Pennsylvania. During a career that has spanned three decades, LaVallee played a major role in creating CHIP, the Children's Health Insurance Program, which provides insurance to uninsured children. He has also been a leader in providing counseling services to grieving children. A long-time friend and confidant of Fred Rogers, today LaVallee leads Variety - The Children's Charity, an effort to provide children with disabilities with specially modified bicycles and speaking devices.*

**Who was the biggest influence on your life?**

My grandfather shaped me into the person I am. He experienced significant adversity but always ... met challenges positively.

### **Growing up, you worked in a bakery in Oakland?**

I grew up in a very middle-class family. We had a bakery in Oakland called Kunst Bakery, which was on Forbes Avenue. I worked there nights through college.

### **How did you get your start working with children?**

After spending a decade working at Shadyside Presbyterian Church, Fred Rogers asked what I wanted to do next. He suggested I take a job directing The Caring Program for children at Blue Cross Blue Shield (now Highmark Health). It was the first private-sector program in the nation for uninsured kids. Back then nobody talked about the uninsured. ... That program became the model for CHIP in Pennsylvania.

### **How did you first meet Fred Rogers?**

We did a baptism together at the church. He was an ordained Presbyterian minister.

### **You've also focused on working with children who have experienced grief during your career. How did that start?**

After a personal tragedy when my stepson died, and through the needs of my own family, I became aware of another unmet need of children, this time, grieving children. Fred Rogers once again provided guidance and encouraged me "to take my broken heart and do something with it." As the executive director of The Caring Foundation at the time, I approached Highmark about this need and once again the company mobilized to meet another unmet need of children in the community, and the Highmark Caring Place, a center for grieving children, adolescents and their families, was launched.

### **How does Variety - the Children's Charity help children with disabilities?**

What I love about Variety is that we are providing life-changing equipment, adaptive bikes and strollers and communication devices, to kids with disabilities. To watch the incredible joy of a child who has never ridden a bike ride a bike for the very first time, or to hear a child use a communication device to say for the first time to his grandmother, "I love you Nana."

### **What's next for Variety?**

Variety is very fortunate to have recently received a grant from the Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development that will allow us to provide communication devices to nearly 1,000 children who are nonverbal or have a communication disorder.

### **How do children qualify for the bikes and speaking devices?**

One out of two of our kids are in families with no disposable income. One in four are in poverty. But we also want to reach middle-income folks who are spending a lot of money on their disabled children and can't afford these bikes or communication devices. So our income guidelines are the highest I know of for a social service program, \$128,750 for a family of four. We wanted to get low- and middle-income people involved. You'd think that's good news, but many families don't believe it. They think it's too good to be true. We need more outreach to middle-income families about what we're offering.

**How can local companies help?**

It would be fantastic if we could get local businesses to get the word out about this program to their employees.

**Have you ever considered another career?**

When I was younger I could have continued that family bakery, but I was more concerned about helping people directly. You could say we were helping people at the bakery by giving them their daily bread, but I was looking for something different.

**What do you do in your spare time? Do you have any?**

I'm pretty busy. What I've learned is if you want to make an impact, sacrifice is involved. It doesn't seem to be that people want to talk about that anymore. It's all supposed to be from 9 to 4. With all due respect, if you want to make a difference, you have to dedicate yourself to it. In the space of time I do have, I give every moment I can to my 3-year-old granddaughter.

**What's next for you?**

I'm at this point, it's the work I'm doing. I feel the clock ticking. I have to make the most of this, so my time goes to my work and my family. I'm comfortable with it.

**BIOBOX**

**Title:** Chief executive officer, Variety - The Children's Charity ("Although I prefer chief excitement officer.")

**Age:** 64

**Education:** B.A., history, Carnegie Mellon University

**Residence:** Cranberry Township

**First job:** Baker in family's bakery, Kunst Bakery.

**Family:** Wife Terese; son, Daniel, his wife, Terrina, and their daughter, Kalea; stepdaughter, Ally Sparacino and husband Chris; and stepdaughters Sarah Vorsheck and Laena Ilk.

**Hobbies:** Reading, walking and spending time with family

**Causes:** "Children, especially kids in need such as kids who are uninsured, kids who are grieving the death of a loved one and kids with special needs."