

The San Diego Union-Tribune.

Couple has passion for aiding kids in crisis

Passion 4 K.I.D.S. has helped Baby Izaiah, many others



Linda and Charles Van Kessler sit in the living room at their home on Thursday in Encinitas, California. This is where children in their Passion 4 Kids program come to play. — *Eduardo Contreras*

ENCINITAS, Calif. — It may be late March, but an artificial Christmas tree is still standing in the living room of Charles and Linda Van Kessler, and perhaps that's fitting, because the Encinitas couple are like year-round Santas to families with sick children.

Through their nonprofit Passion 4 K.I.D.S. (an acronym for Kids in Desperate Situations), the Van Kesslers have provided housing, car payments, home repairs, funeral expenses, wheelchairs, groceries, service dogs, toys and more to dozens of families around the country who have asked for their help. The 8-year-old organization became the focus of the couple's energies three years

ago when they took on the case of “Baby Izaiah,” a Vista toddler left severely disabled when his stroller was struck by a teenage drunken driver in 2010.

Izaiah’s parents, Jacob Wallis and Lucy Verde, consider the Van Kesslers their guardian angels.

“Since Day One, they’ve done everything for us. We would be lost without them,” said Wallis, 24. “They work 24/7 and spend a lot of sleepless nights setting things up to make our family as happy as possible. And it’s not just us, they’ve been angels to dozens of other kids. They give and give and don’t take no for an answer.”

Passion 4 K.I.D.S. is a shoestring organization the Van Kesslers run from their home. Profits from their liquid vitamin company, Passion 4 Life, funds part of their efforts. The rest comes from fundraising on the group's [website](#), scanning the “free” and “for sale” ads on Craigslist, and working with the media like the “Dr. Phil” show to highlight the stories of families in need.

For Izaiah’s family, the organization raised \$100,000 — mostly from small donations of just \$5 to \$10 — to buy the young couple an older home. Then, Linda convinced 64 companies to donate their services to adapt the house for Izaiah’s medical needs.

“I do a lot of begging,” said Linda, 59. “But I have a passion to make these children’s lives better. And we’ve seen how people will come forward to help when they understand how they can.”

Passion 4 K.I.D.S. isn’t corporate funded and there is no paid staff. Most of the projects it funds are small, designed to solve a short-term problem for families teetering on the brink.

“We wanted to work with families in immediate crisis,” said Charles, 73. “These are families that don’t have insurance, they don’t have much left over to cover bills, or big companies haven’t helped them out.”

Born in Amsterdam in 1941, Charles lost his family in the Holocaust and spent eight years in a Dutch orphanage. After he immigrated to the U.S. in 1964, he found success in the Texas insurance business. While doing service work in the mid-1980s for children living in the garbage dumps of Juarez, Mexico, Charles said he felt a divine calling to create a children’s foundation. But he didn’t have the marketing savvy to promote and grow the organization until he met and married Linda, nearly 20 years later.

A New Jersey native, Linda spent decades in the field of media and public relations, first in the White House administration of President Gerald R. Ford, then as Ford’s private appointment secretary in Palm Springs. She also did special projects for 25 years for the Rev. Billy Graham and worked two years at the Rev. Robert Schuller’s Crystal Cathedral in Orange County.

When she and Charles married in 2005, they started a vitamin business (based on a formula Charles developed to improve his own poor health caused by childhood malnutrition). With money coming in from Passion 4 Life, they decided to reinvigorate Charles’ long-dormant children’s foundation, which they renamed Passion 4 K.I.D.S.

The organization faced its biggest challenge with Izaiah Wallis. Linda said she saw a news story about the tragic accident, which left Izaiah brain-damaged and unable to walk or talk, and immediately drove to Rady Children's Hospital San Diego to find his parents.

"They had no idea who I was, but they came down to talk to me and I told them, 'We are here to stand with you and help you. I don't know what that means, but you can count on us,'" said Linda, who coined the nickname "Baby Izaiah" because she knew it would remind the public of how tiny and vulnerable he was.

Over the years, Passion 4 K.I.D.S. has helped get the couple a disabled-access van and covered some monthly bills, insurance copays, therapy sessions and household items. The Van Kesslers even baby-sit Izaiah's 2-year-old sister, Caliah, whenever the need arises.

While Izaiah is the organization's most high-profile client, it helps 12 to 20 other families each month. Recent projects include the purchase of a play structure for a San Jose family with an immune-suppressed daughter who can't leave her home for a year, a motorized scooter for a 7-year-old San Diego boy with an arterial disease, and funeral expenses for a Chula Vista family whose toddler was run over by a car.

The Van Kesslers have also been a big help to Penny and Charles Hauer, who have 18 adopted special-needs children at their home in Rancho San Diego. Passion 4 K.I.D.S. bought new mattresses for every child, arranged the renovation of the home's wheelchair-accessible bathroom and is raising money to train a service dog for 13-year-old son Caleb, who has Duchenne muscular dystrophy.

"There aren't words to describe how grateful we are to them," Penny Hauer said. "They're two incredibly caring and kind people who have stepped up and done wonderful things. Linda and Charles have this remarkable way of finding people who have a need but won't ask for help."

Every year, the Van Kesslers invite the local families they serve to their home for pool parties and Thanksgiving and Christmas dinners. Many have formed friendships and a number of past clients (including Izaiah's family) are paying it forward by helping new clients.

"We live to help people," he said. "For us, it's not work."

Linda said they plan to keep the charity going for as long as they live.

"We won't give it up," she said. "I think we get more out of it than the families do. I can't tell you the joy it brings us to see them smile."