



# THE SMILE MAKER

**Brooke Aldendifer MacLean** ('93) delivers happiness to Chicago area healthcare facilities with Random Acts of Flowers.

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As Brooke MacLean and her four children walked through a Chicago-area senior care facility with dozens of floral bouquets in tow, an older man stepped out and bellowed, "Who wants a quarter pulled from their ear?"

MacLean's then nine-year-old son, Alister, volunteered. The promised shiny quarter appeared, followed by smiles and wonder all around.

"It's a genuine and real moment you just don't forget," MacLean says.

Such heartwarming encounters have increasingly become the norm for MacLean, board chair of the Chicago branch of Random Acts of Flowers (RAF). Founded in 2008 by MacLean's brother-in-law, Larsen Jay, the Tennessee-based nonprofit delivers donated flowers to the ill and infirm.

Hospitalized following a near-fatal fall, Jay noticed that, unlike him, few of his fellow hospital patients had received flowers from well-wishers. Knowing how much such thoughtfulness meant to him, Jay responded by removing cards from bouquets he had accumulated and then delivering the floral arrangements to others.

"Random Acts of Flowers starts with something so simple, yet so beautiful," says MacLean, a former engineering consultant.

Since its January 2015 debut, RAF's Chicago branch—located just two miles southwest of Northwestern's Evanston campus—has delivered more than 55,000 bouquets to approximately 150 senior facilities, rehab centers, and hospitals across Chicagoland.

(RAF also has branched out to Tampa Bay, Indianapolis, and Silicon Valley from its original headquarters in Knoxville, Tennessee.)

As the Chicago branch's nimble leader, MacLean tackles everything from mopping floors to delivering flowers to fundraising. With her two-person staff, she's responsible for overseeing some 500 volunteers, organizing deliveries, and strengthening relationships with healthcare facilities.

"Sometimes I'm the coach, and sometimes I'm the cheerleader," MacLean says.

"But I'm never afraid to roll up my sleeves and do whatever it takes."

Save assembling bouquets, that is.

"My background isn't artistic engineering, and I'm not allowed near the flowers," she jokes.

Put another way, MacLean serves best as the chief problem solver. Leveraging her engineering background, she uses data to drive efficiencies and preaches calm when challenges confront the blossoming nonprofit.

"Panic is never good," she says. "There's always a solution somewhere, so find it and then move on to the next step. It's a very engineering way of thinking."

And when the problems are solved, and flowers find their way into unsuspecting hands, hearty gratitude often follows.

"There's a lot of loneliness, hate, and ugliness in the world, so it's meaningful to bring happiness to people," MacLean says. "When you see someone smile, you smile, too."

DANIEL P. SMITH