

At work
sewing a
doll



A girl with a
doll I made



A special
hug



Two sisters
with their dolls

ADOLL like me

Amy Jandrisevits, 52, uses her skill to help special kids

My job as a paediatric social worker in a children's cancer unit was rewarding – but also tough.

Part of my role involved explaining to kids what would happen during treatment. I'd use dolls to demonstrate – such as giving a doll a pretend blood test or hooking it up to an IV drip.

But I soon realised regular dolls didn't look like most of my patients.

What am I supposed to do – shave the head of a Barbie? I wondered.

Leaving my job to become a full-time mum, I had my son Elijah in 2005 with my husband Matt, then 31. And Samuel arrived in 2009.

But I never forgot

those kids in the cancer ward, counting my blessings for my two healthy boys.

I'd always loved sewing and crafting so, after the boys' bedtime, I played around with projects at my dining room table.

I still had my first doll from when I was a little girl – a treasured toy with a cloth body called Pinkie.

The kids love having a doll that looks like them

Sewing since I was little, I'd made my first doll with my mum, Chris, when I was eight. So I started making them again.

I was pregnant with our third baby in 2015 when I uploaded a couple of photos of my dolls to

Facebook. A few days later a pal messaged me...

That doll is gorgeous – she looks just like my friend's little girl. Only, she's an amputee. Could you make a doll for her?

Challenge accepted!

I sat up in the evenings to make a special one-legged doll. The little girl's mum was over the moon and sent me a photo of her daughter cuddling the doll

– two peas in a pod.

A couple of days later Matt said, 'You have hundreds of likes on Facebook!' I'd posted a picture of the little girl with her doll.

In August 2015 my daughter Kalea was born, and by the end of that year I had over 200 requests from parents, asking if I could make their child a unique doll too. It was pretty overwhelming! After all, I had a little baby and two young sons.

But then I thought back to the children in the cancer unit and how much they'd have loved a doll that looked like them. I realised I had a skill that meant I could help families in need.

So aged 42, I set up a workspace in our dining

room and began spending every spare moment making dolls, stitching buttons and sewing faces – around breastfeeding and helping with homework.

I made a doll for a family who'd adopted a little girl with albinism from China. She was a gorgeous child – but totally unique.

A couple of years later I made a second doll when they adopted her little sister with the same condition.

Not wanting to charge the families for the dolls, I set up a fundraising page to cover costs.

The hardest part was keeping up with requests. My inbox filled with stories of children who had lost limbs, battled cancer or been burned in fires.

I wanted to help them all, but it was impossible. In February 2019, I founded my charity, A Doll Like Me, to make the process easier and more official.

Meanwhile, my parents, Chris, then 75, and Paul, 74, moved house to be closer to us. Mum was a former seamstress so she offered to help making the dolls.

Other supporters helped too. And I now have volunteers who make clothes and knit blankets. We send each doll out with a pair of pyjamas, an outfit like the child's, a blanket

Me with
one of my
dolls



GENERATION
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and a hospital gown.

Six years on, I still do all the work from my dining room – we haven't set the table for dinner in years!

The average doll takes around eight hours and I make three or four each week. Some nights I lie awake, my mind filled with the children who need dolls.

I currently have around 2000 requests. It's so hard reading their stories and having to choose who to help. I've made dolls with disabilities, with walking frames, with missing digits or limbs, facial differences, birthmarks, and dolls with hearing aids... you name it.



Elijah, Samuel
and Kalea

I know they can be a comfort to families, even if a child passes away – I've been sent photos of dolls having picnics at children's gravesides. One little boy I'd made a doll for died, and the family sent me a photo of his brother cuddling the doll, explaining he takes it to bed with him.

Kalea, now 10, once asked why I spend so much time making dolls.

'Imagine being scared at night in a hospital, and having a doll just like you to cuddle,' I replied. 'These dolls have a job to do.'

Now she often helps me pack the dolls and we give them a cuddle, sending

extra love to their child.

And she'll bring a book or a piece of her craft work and sit beside me as I sew.

Matt, now 51, Elijah, 20, and Samuel, 15, all love what I do also.

I've sent dolls to 52 countries. Last year I even made a doll for a little boy in Gaza who'd been badly injured in a bomb blast.

I think of each child as I sew, stitching in love.

Working from a basic template, I add in the differences, making each doll look like its recipient.

When I gave a talk in a local school, one little girl asked, 'What's the hardest part about making the dolls?'

'Some of the children's stories hurt my heart,' I replied.

I'm so glad I'm able to make a difference to children and their families.

I encourage others to say 'yes' when an opportunity to help others presents.

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