

HIGHLAND PARK, IL
Mayor Nancy R. Rotering

Zac's Zoo: Comfort for Children in Distress

In 2005, at seven years of age, Highland Park native Zac Cohen conceived of, and implemented, a program to provide stuffed animals to comfort the children of New Orleans victimized by Hurricane Katrina. With the creation of Zac's Zoo, more than 10,000 new stuffed animals were collected and donated to those children.

In 2018, at 20 years of age, Zac was killed in a motorcycle accident. Looking for a way to honor his memory, Zac's grieving mother reached out to Mayor Rotering. Their conversation covered Zac's service to the children of Katrina and his desire to continue to serve the public by becoming a firefighter/EMT. It also included the Mayor's recollections of ambulance rides with her children who, as toddlers, experienced asthma attacks. On one of those rides, an EMT gave her son a stuffed teddy bear to hold. It had a positive impact on the child and became a lasting memory for his mother. Would Zac's mother want to create a program to provide stuffed animals to children caught in crisis situations who came into contact with police officers, firefighter/EMTs, and other public servants, the Mayor asked. Following up on the idea, Mayor Rotering discussed it with Highland Park's Fire Chief, who immediately endorsed the idea, and the Police Chief, who recognized that, on domestic violence calls, the gift of a toy would be helpful in calming children who might be present. The State's Attorney recognized that stuffed animal gifts could help calm child witnesses in court and in child advocacy centers.

In its first year, a reinstituted Zac's Zoo has collected thousands of animals to supply the area's fire department ambulances with toys to console frightened young patients, and hundreds of police officers with toys to take on domestic violence calls. The Lake County State's Attorney's office has distributed thousands of Zac's Zoo animals to frightened children testifying against abusers in court. Through personal networks, thousands of stuffed animals are now being distributed to first responders in other states, and Zac's Zoo has been recognized nationally for its efforts. As a pro bono attorney, the Mayor incorporated Zac's Zoo as a 501(c)(3) organization in February 2019.

Donations of brand new (with tags) stuffed animals should be shipped to: Zac's Zoo, 1954 First Street, Suite 243, Highland Park IL 60035. Inquiries about the program should be emailed to zacszo098@gmail.com.

Additional information is available from Mayor Nancy Rotering at nrotering@cityhpil.com or 847-926-1000.