



## Child Life Specialist Bea Kwok, pediatric health-care professional

BY CRYSTAL KUPPER / PHOTOS BY D'ANTHONY PHOTOGRAPHY



Clockwise from left: Bea engaging in medical play with a patient / at age 2 / Bea's family when she was a child / graduation from Passaic High School



**From her hospital** wheelchair, the teen girl glared icily at Beatrice “Bea” Kwok. “What are you looking at?” the girl snarled.

Bea gulped. As a certified child life specialist, her entire job at hospitals and medical clinics revolved around serving children. She helped teenagers and their families cope with the stresses of severe illness, injury, trauma, disability and sometimes even death. She had been trained to assist people exactly like this teenager. But what if the patient didn’t want to be helped?

Bea took a deep breath and prayed. *Father, help me reach her. Help me earn her respect.*

The name-calling didn’t stop right away, and at times the anger still spewed. Bea understood why: This girl was in constant physical pain, tired of spending so much time at the hospital and scared by her lifelong diagnosis. So Bea kept praying, smiling and showing up with a listening ear and her toolkit of stress balls, art supplies, electronics, music and cuddly animals.

Gradually, something changed in both Bea and the teen.

“Each time I worked with her, we got closer and closer and eventually, she stopped bullying me. We

developed a great rapport,” she says. “Patience helped. Staying in tune with her needs helped. Engaging in activities that suited her helped. Speaking at her level helped.”

As a child life specialist, Bea’s “help” varies greatly for her patients. It includes everything from converting foes to friends to playing with play dough and puppies. Because when it comes to child life services, play is serious business. “Play is important because it helps kids express themselves. And it encourages their development even during their stay at the hospital, which could be long-term,” Bea says. “Medical play [specifically] helps kids understand and prepare for procedures and surgeries that they have to undergo.” >

### Child Life Specialists Fast Facts:

Child life programs began in the 1920s when researchers noticed that babies and children were dying at alarmingly high rates in American hospitals from not being touched and stimulated.

Approximately 400 child life programs exist at hospitals around the U.S.

Larger children’s hospitals, such as St. Jude in Tennessee, employ more than a dozen full-time specialists, while others hire on a day-by-day basis.

The average American child life specialist makes close to \$59,000 a year, but some earn more than six figures.

Child life specialists aren’t limited to hospitals and doctors’ offices. They also bring their skills to camps, courtrooms, dental and private practices, support/bereavement groups, hospice and early intervention programs.

PHOTOS PROVIDED BY D'ANTHONY AND BEA

## The Road to Becoming a Child Life Specialist

Do you have what it takes to be a child life specialist? Beatrice says you do if you are:

■ a good listener

■ naturally empathetic and understanding

■ a born nurturer

■ quick to find the fun in most situations

■ interested in pursuing a degree in psychology, early childhood education, child development or recreational therapy

■ able to refresh yourself outside of work through the Lord, exercise, friends/family, hobbies, etc.

### From Hong Kong to hospitals

Bea was an introverted pastor's kid born in Hong Kong and raised in the working-class urban neighborhoods of north New Jersey. The city of Passaic was very tough, according to Bea.

Bea grew up with her nose in books, whether written in English or Cantonese. Even her older sister's psychology textbooks fascinated her.

"I enjoyed learning about the human mind and behavior," she says. "And I have always loved children, even when I was a young kid myself."

Her family didn't have a lot of money, but they did have intellectual drive and each other. Poverty and crime were common around her neighborhood. But instead of scaring her, Bea says, "I believe that God used the challenges I faced as a teen to make me stronger and to cultivate my desire to help others."

After graduating as high school valedictorian, Bea headed to Rutgers University, where she earned her bachelor's degree in psychology. But instead of going into a psychology-related field, Bea got a job as a paralegal. It was steady, intelligent, honorable work. She wondered, though, how she would use the parts of her personality (like compassion, empathy and playfulness) that didn't quite fit at a straight-laced law firm.

### Redirected

Raised in a Christian family, Bea had always known about Jesus. But she didn't establish a personal relationship with Him until she was 30. That was right around the time she finished a master's degree in educational psychology from Kean University. Graduate studies were something she decided to pursue since she was still interested in using her psychology training.

Then in quick succession, her path became clear. A friend told her about the growing field of child life specialists, who are sort of like "child whisperers" in a medical setting. They do whatever it takes to make hospital or outpatient stays comfortable and less traumatic for children—specifically for kids with

conditions ranging from autism and brain injuries to cancer and diabetes.

"When [my friend] first told me about the field, I was absolutely overjoyed. It was a career path that matched perfectly with my God-given skills and desires," Bea says. "I had never heard about child life before then, but I soon took steps to become certified and began working as a specialist."

The job requires a bachelor's or master's degree in subjects such as psychology, child development, counseling or education. Thankfully, without realizing it, Bea had already taken all of the required core classes.

### Staying fresh

Bea has now worked as a child life specialist for 14 years. (She still works full time as a paralegal before heading over to the hospital where she works as often as the hospital needs her.) Quite simply, she *loves* it. A lot of people think that constantly working with desperately ill kids would be depressing and difficult. They ask how she can watch children go through chemotherapy, surgeries—even death—and not be permanently upset.

"I never see it that way," Bea says. "While I empathize with [my patients] and what they're going through, I always see it as God placing me in their lives so I can be a positive influence and encouragement for them."



Bea playing Uno with a patient



Occasionally Bea works with youth who cannot talk or move but still need conversation and fun. Other times, she develops such tight relationships with patients that she experiences compassion fatigue and burnout, especially if they pass away.

"It's challenging to maintain a professional 'emotional wall' between the patient and a child life specialist, especially when our goal is to establish a good rapport and relationship," Bea says. "It makes it that much more difficult when our personalities are naturally caring, loving and nurturing."

To counteract that "compassion drain," Bea attends as many child life conferences as possible. She constantly reads the latest scientific literature in her field and winds down with cycling. But professional networking and exercise aren't her main tools for psychological and spiritual health; her relationship with Jesus Christ is.

"Being a follower [of the Lord] helps me stay fresh mentally," Bea says.

"There are days when I work at the hospital after a long day at the law firm, and the last thing I can do is give more of myself to others," she says. "Relying on God's strength to carry me through is always a guaranteed win." Plus, Bea sees the hospital as a mission field.

"I love how God uses me to speak up for these kids and provide them with the tools they need to cope during their stay in the hospital," Bea says. "I think being a child life specialist is very pleasing to Jesus! We [are called] to love our neighbors, and being a child life specialist certainly does that." ?

*Crystal Kupper is a grad student, military wife, marathon runner and mom to four youngsters in New Jersey. Her daughter regularly sees child life specialists during her frequent hospital stays.*