GRATITUDE ON WHEELS
AVATARS FOR KIDS
BY EMMALEE C. TORISK

In May 2017, Cris Colaluca graduated from Mohawk Junior-Senior High School in Bessemer, Pa. He’s among the first in the country to earn his diploma with the help of a robot. VGo is a 4-foot, roughly 20-pound, remotely controlled avatar with a video screen face and wheels; it allows immobile patients to participate in experiences they normally would miss.

For his senior project, Colaluca, 19, started a GoFundMe campaign in order to buy three VGos for Children’s Hospital of Pittsburgh of UPMC, where he has been a patient for years.

As a boy, Colaluca was diagnosed with electrical status epilepticus during slow-wave sleep (ESESS), a rare form of epilepsy syndrome that typically develops in childhood. In addition to experiencing seizures while asleep, ESESS patients struggle to understand speech and language (what’s known as receptive dysphasia), as well as to express themselves in speech (expressive dysphasia).

Colaluca’s complications prevented him from attending school beginning in the second grade. He felt isolated from his peers, and his education suffered. But that changed in seventh grade when Mohawk administrators ordered him a VGo. Now he is paying the favor forward by donating to Children’s.

“I was thinking it would help the kids go outside their rooms and explore and do something they can’t really physically do,” Colaluca says.

His GoFundMe campaign is sponsored by VecnaCares, the nonprofit branch of Massachusetts-based Vecna Technologies, which manufactures VGos. The Verizon Foundation and country music artist Jimmy Wayne helped promote the campaign.

In the end, Colaluca’s senior project overshot its goals, raising enough for five robots. The first three went to Children’s, two donated by the Verizon Foundation and one by Pat McAfee, a Pittsburgh native and retired Indianapolis Colts player. The GoFundMe donations bought two VGos for Colaluca’s alma mater, Mohawk Area School District. (The campaign is still active.)

At Children’s, the robots will be used to help patients connect with life outside the hospital room—keeping in touch with family and friends, continuing with school, and preparing for medical events through virtual tours of spaces like operating and waiting rooms. Users see through VGo’s camera, and with a computer or iPad, they can direct the robot to look up, down, and from side to side. The user’s face appears on the video screen as though he is talking on Skype. Microphones allow the robot to pick up sounds in its environment, and a speaker broadcasts the user’s voice.

Andrew Urbach, professor of pediatrics at Pitt Med, has treated Colaluca through the years. He has seen how the avatar transformed his patient’s life. “It’s a part of him,” Urbach says. “It gave him the freedom to develop as a person, and it changed him. I think that’s where his passion comes from and why he wants other individuals who are struggling with similar issues . . . to have this available.”

Vecna will donate a VGo for Cris Colaluca’s use, as well. (The Colaluca family credits business author Eva Rosenberg for helping make this happen.) That new VGo will go off to college with Colaluca in the fall.