On an overcast spring day in 2013, then 11-year-old Luke Maeding went to see his doctor, Pitt professor of pediatrics Geoffrey Kurland, when Batman showed up.

The caped crusader, along with Superman, Spider-Man, and Captain America, was rappelling off the facade of Children’s Hospital of Pittsburgh of UPMC. Kids rushed to the windows, greeting the superheroes with cheers and fist bumps against the glass. Then these supers—from Allegheny Window Cleaning—got to work with squeegees and buckets.

The costumed cleaners come twice a year: in the spring and around Halloween. The tradition began in 2012, when Elizabeth Munsch, director of facilities at Children’s, saw a picture of a window washer dressed as Spider-Man in a London newspaper. Coincidentally, Michelle Matuizek, office manager of Allegheny Window, saw the same story. Together, they decided to try it at Children’s and started a trend. Many children’s hospitals in America have followed suit after seeing coverage of the event in Pittsburgh, says Munsch.

“The children just go nuts,” she says. “It helps them forget why they are here.”

It’s a special day for the window cleaners. They are accustomed to hastily closed blinds, not smiles and waves. “You can tell you made their day a little bit better,” says Mark Errico, who was Captain America this year. “And my day is better too, absolutely.”

Kurland, who is medical director of pediatric lung transplantation at Children's, says patients like Luke (see inset above) are the real heroes: “They are the ones withstanding the treatments, medications, and surgeries.” — Elizabeth Hoover

— Photography courtesy Children’s Hospital of Pittsburgh of UPMC