

# Journey to the wish



ANIMAL REPAIR SHOP CREATES AN INTIMATE MIXED-REALITY WISH DISCOVERY ATTRACTION FOR MAKE-A-WISH® SOUTH FLORIDA

by **Joe Kleiman**



For almost forty-five years, the attractions and entertainment community has partnered with Make-A-Wish® to provide life-changing wishes to children diagnosed with critical illnesses – through things like theme park trips, sports idol meet-and-greets, and blockbuster concerts. The 2025 opening of WishWorks in Miami took that partnership to a new level, with the team at Animal Repair Shop helping craft a custom magical experience for kids beginning their Make-A-Wish Journey.

WishWorks was designed to create the journey of making a wish just as magical as the wish itself, combining themed entertainment magic, cutting edge technology and unforgettable storytelling to create a personalized mixed-reality experience re-imagined for the future. Animal Repair Shop's refreshing approach helped earn WishWorks a TEA Thea Award, though perhaps the best rewards can be found on the faces of kids enjoying the new experience.

## Make-A-Wish 101

The Make-A-Wish process typically starts with a staff member visiting the child's home or hospital to help determine what wish the child has that the organization can fulfill. But Miami-based Make-A-Wish South Florida (MAWSF) wanted to reinvent that process and create an imaginative experience where wish discernment is presented as pure entertainment, where creative exploration is encouraged, and where a fantastical environment inspires new ideas and restores the whole family. MAWSF turned to Animal Repair Shop, the themed entertainment design firm founded by Susan Bonds, to head up the team creating WishWorks.

Among the team's contributors were lighting design firm Visual Terrain, led by Lisa Passamonte Green, AV show control programmer Joe Fox, fabricators Nassal and Ravenswood, special effects firm Technifex, and animation firm Roger.

"Projects like this don't just happen in a bubble," explains Bonds. "WishWorks began about a decade ago, when Shariff Malnik (MAWSF's then Chairman of the Board) had this vision and reached out to us. Projects need an advocate to make them happen, and Shariff was that advocate for almost a decade."

"WishWorks should be a magical adventure," says Karen Mullins, MAWSF's Chief Program Officer. "It should be more than just 'tell me what you want.'"

"Some Make-A-Wish chapters were starting to experiment with themed environments," shares Norman Wedderburn, President and CEO of MAWSF. "However, these were relatively static experiences that provided a themed environment for the traditional process. We wanted to take it to another level, so that the entire wish experience would be so magical that it would awaken the deep imagination of children."



**Norman Wedderburn**  
MAWSF



**Karen Mullins**  
MAWSF



**Susan Bonds**  
Animal Repair Shop



**Alex Lieu**  
Animal Repair Shop

Wedderburn adds: "In doing that, the children from right out of the gate know that something truly special is happening to them, and that's transformational."

## Wishing upon the stars

The experience actually starts at home, where the Wish Kid receives a special medallion that gives them access to a secret workshop, wherein the science of wishing stars is studied. Upon arrival at the Finker-Frenkel Wish House, Make-A-Wish South Florida's new headquarters in Miami, the family finds a special parking space designated just for them. Once inside, the child's image appears in a digital frame behind the reception desk, welcoming them.

The WishWorks experience lasts 60-90 minutes and is designed for only one child and their family at a time. "One of the greatest outcomes is that everyone gets to participate," points out Bonds. "It becomes an experience for the whole family."

Make-A-Wish staff welcome the family into an ordinary reception room with a beautiful custom mural depicting the wish discovery journey led by a Wish Granter.

Magically gaining access to the Wish Workshop, the child is introduced to their guide Einstein, an animated hamster who appears throughout the room in integrated media, special effects and upon physical props. Einstein addresses the child directly, making a personal connection and is voiced by Bob Bergen, the voice of Porky Pig and Tweety Bird. Through pipes adorning the walls, Einstein can be seen moving from one spot to another, encouraging the child to explore all aspects of the



*WishWorks transforms the wish making process into a magical interactive journey for the Make-A-Wish child and their family. Photo courtesy of Make-A-Wish Southern Florida.*

360-degree physical space, with its variety of analog and digital interactives.

Einstein introduces the child to the four concepts of wishing – what they want to be, who they want to meet, where they want to go, and what they want to have – along with the idea that all things (animals, plants, and even inanimate objects) have wishes. Kids get to meet a cactus that wants to go on a shopping spree and a fish that wants to meet the

Loch Ness Monster. Einstein also shares his own wish that he wants to travel.

The child then enters the Starcatcher room, where they summon their wishing star to appear in the special Starcatcher machine. The child's power proves too great and the star bounces around the room, ultimately breaking into parts strewn around the building. It's now up to the child to help recover the star. This is where the power of XR shines as

the Wish Kid is given a digital device to explore the building. Here, the reality of an office space is mixed with the fantastical elements of the wish decision process as the child uses an AR-enabled tablet to locate and collect stardust and pieces of the broken star.

“During this process, the child learns that The Wish House, the building itself, wishes to be a castle,” continues Wedderburn. “This is why, at the end of the hallway on the third floor, the child next discovers the Royal Hall of a castle.”

Within this grand hall, using media, physical sets, props and costumes, the child explores various examples of wishes to be made and begins to determine what wishes they want to pursue. The Make-A-Wish staff help collect the child’s top few choices for each of the four wish categories, so that the team has several

options to work from. “It takes time to fulfill a wish, so WishWorks turns the standard wish selection process into an engaging and memorable experience while providing an immediate sense of gratification,” explains Wedderburn.

The Wish Kid returns to the StarCatcher room, where the Wish Discovery process is completed in a spectacular finale, with the child receiving a special momento to take home until their wish is fulfilled.

“They don’t yet know what that wish is going to be,” says Wedderburn. “There are some logistics on our part, but when they leave, the child knows that one of their wishes will be coming true.”

**Wishing while you work**

To create the immersive WishWorks experience, the team at Animal Repair Shop, led by Bonds and Chief Creative

Officer Alex Lieu, was a natural choice. Bonds spent a large portion of her career at Walt Disney Imagineering, working on major attractions like Indiana Jones Adventure and Mission: SPACE before getting into gaming. Lieu came from the online gaming world and was one of the early hires at Disney Online. Together, they had been integrating physical and digital into award-winning storytelling experiences through emerging technology for decades.

“At Disney there was a lot of discussion about next-gen technology between Disney Interactive and Imagineering – including taking technology, gaming and theme park design concepts to create experiences that give you agency and personalization,” explains Lieu. “We saw AR and mixed reality as natural extensions of storytelling and used that to bring WishWorks to life.”

“It’s important to note this is not gamification,” Bonds clarifies. “We created a responsive fantasy world surrounding the child, designed to enable them to accomplish a task in a way that they will always remember.”

The team’s background helped solve challenges throughout the design process. For example, with Make-A-Wish recipients ranging from toddlers to teens, Animal Repair Shop was challenged with figuring out a proper age-appropriate approach that worked equally as well for 8-year-olds as 18-year-olds. They initially considered creating custom content for different ages but looked to classic storytelling combined with emerging technology to come up with a singular story that worked across age groups. “We knew if we created something cool, cute and emotional, we could target it for teenagers and the younger kids would still get it,” explains Lieu. “The really young kids may not capture all of the story, but they would still be able to enjoy the environment we created.”

The project allowed the team to break from traditional theme park design, which often focuses on precise and repeatable experiences. “Specialization and customization were important in designing the WishWorks experience,” adds Bonds. “The Wish Granter needs to consider the specific needs of each child. Some children may have sensory processing issues or attention issues, so we’ve designed it where the facilitator can adapt things easily through a tablet controller, altering the speed or order of events or the intensity of lighting or sound. There’s a lot of flexibility that a normal theme park operator would not have.”



*The animated Einstein hamster character helps guide the child on the process of wish making. Image courtesy of Make-A-Wish Southern Florida.*

Also unlike traditional theme park design, for the first five years of development, Animal Repair Shop created concepts for a property that MAWSF had yet to acquire. That meant once a location was secured, plans had to be modified as the office space was being developed.

“Pre-visualization became an important element in the parallel implementation of the office buildout and the experience,” explains Bonds. “Heidi Wiegand, project manager for Cumming Group, stayed with us throughout the design process, even when they were in a completely different stage than we were. She was very open and embraced this idea that had never been done before.”

Behind the magic are 38 unique screens and projectors, hundreds of light fixtures, over 45 pieces of unique animation, original music played through 64 audio players and more than 200 cues controlled by Wish Granters

that allow them to customize and pace the show for each Wish Kid.

**Wishing for the future**

Since opening, WishWorks has become the talk of the Make-A-Wish community, with many chapters paying a visit, including a recent one from Make-A-Wish Greece. Though the experience was designed to be changed as needed and potentially even adapted to become a home experience, Wedderburn sees the high level of satisfaction from kids visiting WishWorks as proof that it’s already a success. “Many of them tell us they never want to leave,” he adds.

“When a child walks into the Workshop, they are so inspired and able to see different things that we previously could not bring to them,” says Make-A-Wish’s Mullins. “The experience of WishWorks is really a wish come true - not only for the kids, but for the entire Make-A-Wish family.” •



*The first Wish Kid through WishWorks begins to explore the Wish Workshop and all the magic it holds within. Photo courtesy of Make-A-Wish Southern Florida.*