

Robot Train Delivers More than Medicine

Colorful choo-choo cheers the young patients at Levine.

by Karen Garloch

You can hear the robot before you see it.

The “choo choo” sound of a train and whistle announce the presence of Levine Children's Hospital's newest “employee” – a moving robot that resembles “The Little Engine That Could.”

The robot delivers medications from the hospital pharmacy to patient floors. It's intended to make the hospital a “happier and more peaceful” place, according to Sherrard Georgius, a founder of the Dream *catcher* Society, a group of Charlotte-area families who raised money to buy the \$180,000 robot.

Inside the engine sits a kind-faced conductor doll with a huge mustache. He's wearing blue and white denim overalls with suspenders and a matching cap. It's printed with his name, Smoke, after Charlotte businessman Smokey Bissell, who led the campaign to raise \$66 million to help build the one-year-old addition to Carolinas Medical Center.

Levine is the third children's hospital in the nation to have the robot-turned-train, created by Pittsburgh-based Aethon.

At the robot's public debut Monday, adults marveled as the yellow, orange and blue engine navigated halls and operated elevators. A voice, dubbed by the late actor Don LaFontaine, announced the robot's business: “Express train with an express delivery.”

On the eighth-floor progressive care unit, Smoke stopped to allow nurse Elisa Edgerton to open the medicine cabinet. Instead of drugs, she pulled out two miniature Nestle Crunch bars and gave one to 2-year-old Kha-Mari Davis, who reached out to touch the talking train.

“It helps them not be afraid,” Edgerton said, “if they see their meds coming off of a train.”