



Empowering Young Minds Together: Alliance and Variety – the Children’s Charity

This is the third year that Variety – the Children’s Charity Detroit has funded the Alliance’s ReNEWed, Jr. program. Variety was instrumental in working with the Alliance to adapt the Alliance’s ReNEWed program for middle school children into a program that could be used for younger, elementary school kids. ReNEWed, Jr. is a key element of Variety’s “Being You Being Strong” children’s mental health initiative.

Julie Brenner, President and CEO of the Alliance, is pleased with the ongoing partnership with Variety. “Variety and the Alliance have common goals for advancing the welfare of

kids in our community who are challenged with navigating their feelings in our rapidly changing and demanding world. Variety’s financial support and involvement in ReNEWed, Jr. has allowed both organizations to help more kids than either of us could have reached working alone.”

The Program

ReNEWed, Jr., is an evidence-based, comprehensive skills training program designed for second, third and fourth grade elementary school students. It consists of three interactive lessons with ice breakers, question and answer sessions, games, and movement to keep students engaged. Its purpose is to help kids learn how to deal with stress and anxiety by practicing mindfulness, using breathing exercises, learning to identify emotions, managing social media, and learning how to recognize healthy versus unhealthy relationships. The program can be taught during the school day, in after-school settings, or in any youth-centered group or club.

Variety has its roots in the entertainment industry, but its heart is the community. People from all walks of life contribute to Variety and experience the joy of helping a child, confident that their generosity has a real impact and results in markedly improving a child’s future.

Michelle Murphy is the Executive Director of Variety – the Children’s Charity Detroit. She says, “Variety is a children’s charity—simply helping kids no matter the need. Variety provides support and services to more than 20,000 children with unique and special needs, those who are under-resourced, and those living with illness or extraordinary challenges. Variety is proud to enable happier, healthier, and more independent futures via effective and innovative core programs that address the diverse needs of children in our community.

“One of our eight key initiatives is ‘Being You Being Strong.’ The need for this initiative developed from the patterns of increased stress and mental health challenges experienced by children during the COVID-19 pandemic. We worked with the Alliance to develop an elementary-focused program for young children that was based on the Alliance’s data-driven and impactful ReNEWed program, allowing for continued age-appropriate support.

“ReNEWed, Jr. has been well received by participating elementary schools, and the demand for the program continues to increase. Adding this mental health focus to our roster of Variety core programs was a priority and meets our program requirements for being ‘sound, swift and sustainable.’”

A Legacy of Compassion

Variety’s roots trace back nearly a century. Founded in 1927 by 11 theatre owners in Pittsburgh, the organization transformed into a charity the following year after a life-changing discovery. A one-month-old baby girl was found abandoned in a theatre with a note from her mother pleading for help. The theatre owners took her in, naming her Catherine Variety Sheridan, and pledged to support her upbringing. The story captured national attention, inspiring a movement that led to the creation of one of the world’s most impactful children’s charities.

Today, Variety operates 39 offices—known as “tents”—across 11 countries, serving millions of children. Catherine, later renamed Joan Riker by her adoptive parents, grew up to become a nurse and mother, dedicating her life to helping others, especially children.

This spirit of compassion and action continues to define Variety’s work. Through initiatives like ReNEWed, Jr., the organization not only honors its origins but also adapts to meet the evolving needs of today’s youth. By investing in mental health education at an early age, Variety and the Alliance are laying the foundation for healthier, more resilient futures for children.

As demand for ReNEWed, Jr. grows, so does the impact of this vital program. With continued support from Variety and its community of donors, more children will gain the skills they need to thrive, empowered to be strong by being themselves.

Classroom Impact

According to David King, a long-standing member and past President of Variety’s local and international boards and a member of the Alliance board, the ReNEWed, Jr. program has been met with enthusiasm and positive feedback from both students and teachers. King says that the interactive nature of the lessons, which include icebreakers, games, and movement activities, keeps students engaged and eager to participate.

King has been instrumental in the development and success of the ReNEWed, Jr. program. He often visits classrooms to observe the program in action and is deeply committed to its mission. “Having served on both the Variety and Alliance boards, I’ve had a unique opportunity to help bring these two organizations together around a shared mission. ReNEWed, Jr. is one of the most meaningful programs I’ve ever been part of. I’ve spent time in classrooms watching kids engage with tools that help them navigate real-life challenges. It’s powerful. The program is well received and making a difference. Teachers are enthusiastic about the program and want to be involved.”

Like King, Connie Skandalaris is a past-president of the Variety Board and has led the Variety Feeds Kids program for 17 years.

Skandalaris relates, “The feedback from the kids modeling new behavior is positive. For example, a third-grade boy told me that, after a ReNEWed, Jr. session, he reached out to a classmate with whom he had never spoken and discovered that they had a lot in common.”

She went on to share another occasion, “At a camp for kids, a seven-year-old boy told me that he remembered he should tell his mom if he was on the computer and someone made him uncomfortable. The program is impactful and widely beneficial.”

King concludes, “From Variety’s perspective, this is exactly the kind of return we hope for; lasting, community-driven impact that helps kids grow stronger and more resilient.”

Hand-drawn thank you cards from children attending ReNEWed Jr.

