



Pamela Greene and Michael Dawidziak started The Rollstone Foundation to help would-be parents adopt children with disabilities or terminal illness from around the world.

# A power couple's big lift

After years in politics, LI pair works to save the world, one special-needs orphan at a time

BY ELLEN YAN  
Special to Newsday

**A**fter visiting an Ethiopian orphanage, Michael Dawidziak and his wife, Pamela Greene, recalled being unprepared for the reality a world away from Long Island. The Bayport couple, who made the trip in March 2008 to support Dawidziak's daughter as she

adopted a boy, saw dozens of youngsters whose parents had died of AIDS. Some kids looked malnourished; others had HIV, their health further compromised by a scarcity of medication.

When a little girl named Martha said she wanted to be an earth science teacher, Greene remembers turning away. "I started to cry because the chances of Martha being an earth science teacher in

Ethiopia were slim to nothing," she recounted. "Whereas if Martha were in a loving family in a healthy home, she can be whatever she wanted to be.

"That was the moment where I said we have to give these children a chance."

The experience fueled the genesis of The Rollstone Foundation, a nonprofit the couple started in 2008 and that has raised almost \$1 million to help pay for about 540 adoptions of

children with terminal illness, developmental disabilities and other special needs.

The cost of adopting a child from another country can be upward of \$30,000, including airfare, hotels, family and home evaluations, and adoption agency fees, according to those who work in the field.

Rollstone "was founded on the idea that money shouldn't be the barrier to a child being adopted," Dawidziak said. The

organization is able to approve about 25% of the funding applications it receives, he said.

Since the foundation's inception, Dawidziak, 66, a national political consultant, and Greene, 60, the attorney for Babylon Town's zoning appeals board and a former Islip Town board member, have been packing up their political careers bit by bit. He's the non-

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# Zero overhead, lots of love

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profit's treasurer, and Greene is the secretary, and both have decided to focus on their "legacy" work by saying no to most clients and other volunteer requests.

### 'YOU CAN'T NOT KNOW'

The couple touts Rollstone's "zero overhead" because there's no office and its 13 board members work for free, from paring hundreds of applications each year to filing the foundation's tax reports. Every spring, the nonprofit holds a fundraising gala and silent auction at the Mansion at Timber Point in Great River, garnering about \$130,000, the bulk of its annual funding.

Families and children are invited to the gala to tell their stories. A few years ago, one speaker was a terminally ill child, Greene said: "This little boy came and was in a wheelchair, but then he stood up and sang 'Let it Go.' There was not a dry eye in the house." He died, Greene said, but was not an orphan.

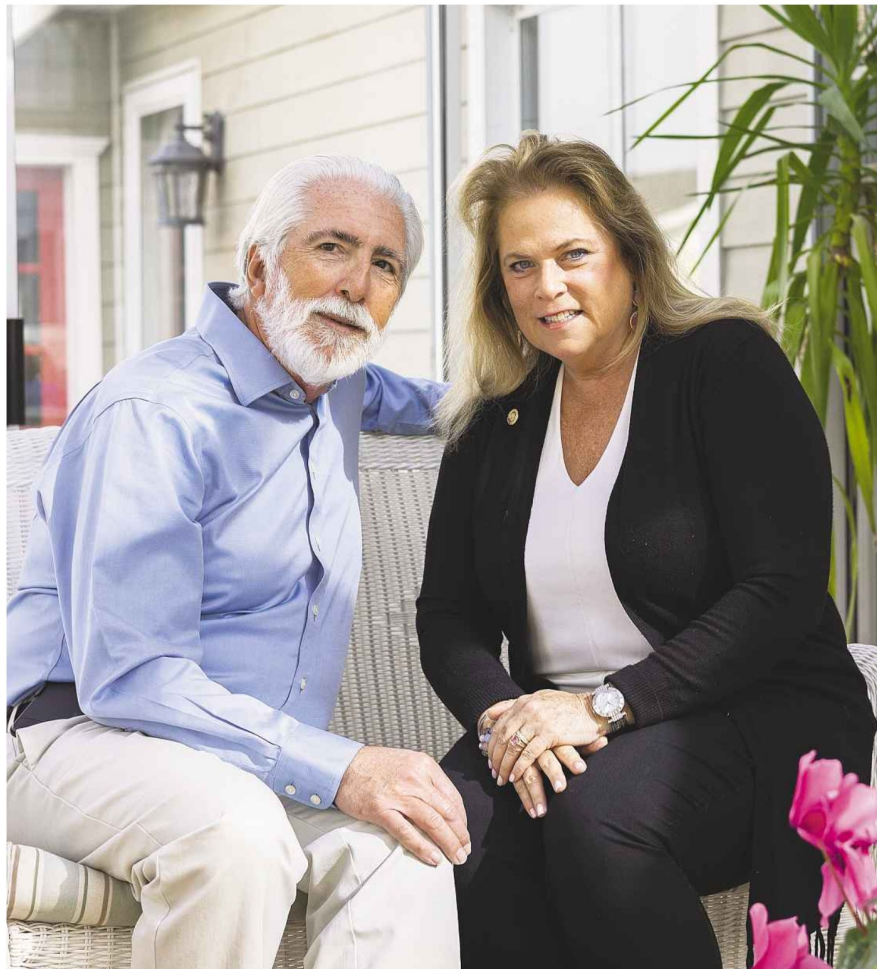
Seared in her mind are the conditions adoption agencies and adoptive parents describe encountering at orphanages, she said: Children who have been sexually abused; babies who stop crying because their cries have gone unanswered; infants whose hands are malformed because they were chained in a crib.

"Once you know, you can't not know," Greene said. She champions the "living saints among us," those willing to take on the challenges of saving children with special needs.

"People make choices," Greene said in explaining her dedication to Rollstone clients. "They make choices to go into debt to buy a boat, they make choices to go into debt to buy a camper, they make choices to go into debt to buy a second home. These people are making choices to go into debt for \$30,000 to save a human life."

Tabitha Challis, 41, a social media manager who lives in Baltimore, said she sewed and sold 4,000 masks during the pandemic to augment funds raised by friends to adopt a child from Bulgaria.

She and her husband, Henry,



Dawidziak acts as Rollstone executive director without pay, and Greene handles the yearly fundraising gala.

**"I've looked at everything I've done as training for what I'm doing now."**

— National political consultant Michael Dawidziak

49, applied to Rollstone in 2020, finding it was the easiest application, at one page. With a \$3,000 grant from Rollstone, the Challises realized they had about \$45,000 — enough to rescue more than one child.

"With their help, we were able to adopt two," Tabitha Challis said. "Eventually we would have gotten there, but it shortened the timeline."

In 2021, the couple brought

home Jackson, who was 11 and has speech and cognitive disorders, and Indiana, who was 3 and has Down syndrome, to join their son Zephyr. Now, Jackson can sing, and Indiana can make his mother laugh until she's rolling on the floor, their new mom said.

When she took her sons to Rollstone's 2021 gala, everyone treated Jackson as the "best celebrity" they'd ever met

when he acted as if he were an official greeter, she said. And guests escorted Indiana around when he got fidgety.

"It was a room full of people who really cared," Challis said.

### FUNDRAISING CHALLENGES

Officials at America World Adoption, based in McLean, Virginia, which has worked with Rollstone on about two dozen adoptions, praised the

nonprofit.

Few nonprofits focus on the most vulnerable orphans, said Mary Hamilton, the agency's finance director. And, unlike most groups, which pay in the late stages of the adoption process, Rollstone pays for costs at every stage.

Hamilton added, "For an organization to not have any operating costs is really unusual, and it just shows that the founders had a very selfless view of the mission they were trying to accomplish."

Dawidziak said raising money locally is a challenge because Long Islanders want to see an impact in their own community. Only one Long Island couple has ever applied for a Rollstone grant, getting \$2,000 to assist the adoption of a 12-year-old boy from China in 2015, he said.

While the charity is open to funding adoptions of special-needs orphans in this country — it has funded one — opportunities are rare because abandoning children with disabilities is uncommon in the United States, he said.

The nonprofit's work may seem a world away from its founders' careers, but the couple, both lifelong Christians, say they feel God's hand in their lives. The foundation name stems from Greene's favorite Bible passage, in which Mary sees a big stone covering the entrance to Jesus' tomb and asks, "Who will roll the stone away for us?"

Dawidziak draws a direct line from political consulting to charity: "I've looked at everything I've done as training for what I'm doing now."

As the founder of Sayville-based Strategic Planning Systems, which at one point had 10 employees, he was a strategist for presidential candidates including George H.W. Bush and Sen. John McCain. He has worked for dozens of local politicians, including Steve Levy and Peter Fox Cohalan, both former Suffolk County executives. Dawidziak also worked for campaigns that fought the Shoreham nuclear plant and championed pine barrens' preservation.

Working in the computer industry after graduating from college, Dawidziak fell into politics when his boss asked





Tabitha and Henry Challis with their eldest son, Zephyr, right, Indiana (in Henry's arms) and Jackson.



Jackson Challis feeds Indiana breakfast on their first morning after being adopted in March 2021.



Zephyr Challis meets his two newly adopted brothers, both from Bulgaria, for the first time.

him to help John O'Neill in his campaign for Huntington Town supervisor. Using the computer, he compiled a list of people with Irish surnames from the Huntington voter rolls, then focused pitches to them, pioneering the strategy of "microtargeting."

Dawidziak has brought such strategies to Rollstone. With every business card he gets, he warns its owner that the information will go in Rollstone's

database for targeted news and funding pitches — and he gives the card's owner one chance to retrieve the card. At fundraisers, before asking for donations, he tells a version of "The Star Thrower," by Loren Eiseley, in which thousands of starfish wash ashore and one girl begins throwing them back in the water one by one, telling a bystander cynical of her efforts, "I made a difference to that one."

Greene, an intern for an upstate assemblyman in 1983, caught the political bug as she saw several high-profile issues play out, including efforts to reinstate the death penalty and pass the bottle-recycling bill. At one point, she said, she saw a young Patrick Halpin, the assemblyman representing her Babylon Village district in the 1980s, and wondered "Why can't that be me?"

At age 27 in 1991, Greene

became the youngest person to sit on Islip's town board, serving until the end of 2007, after an unsuccessful bid for town supervisor. Since then, she's taught at Suffolk County Community College and the former Dowling College, and been Suffolk County's director of real estate acquisitions.

#### PIVOT TO NONPROFIT

But decades ago, as they saw politics becoming more partisan and less friendly, each experienced a major life event and reassessed what should be valued. For Dawidziak, the moment came when he was diagnosed with colon cancer in 2002.

"I really looked back at that point in my life, and I said 'If this is it... I've had a great life. I got to sit in the White House. I got to travel,'" recounted Dawidziak, now cancer free. "If I had a regret at that point, it was I hadn't given enough back."

When he saw the plight of special-needs orphans, he concluded that the problem was God's "answer to a prayer" on how to give back.

Greene was a widow at age 40, and she grieved for years. Then she found companionship in Dawidziak, whom she had known from political gatherings and who was recovering from his divorce.

That friendship turned into a "fire," she said. They married June 7, 2008 — or 6-7-8 to make it easy for her husband to remember, Greene joked.

For more than a year leading up to their visit to Ethiopia in 2008, the couple had researched the orphanage and adoptions in general. One night while eating dinner at a bar, they discussed how they could gather enough money for one adoption, then ended up writing on a napkin the names of 10 friends they believed would chip in funds — and ask their friends for money.

"It's very uplifting to be part of something that's doing good

in the world," Greene said. "So many people feel overwhelmed by the news and the sadness and the difficulties, and they feel that they're powerless to change that."

Board member Dottie Baginato, 71, of Commack, an accountant who adopted three girls from Ukraine before Rollstone was created, said she hustles all year to find gifts for the gala's silent auctions.

She has cried tears of joy over photos of the orphans helped by the foundation. She finds particularly heartwarming their post-adoption photos in which "they just look happy and healthy."

Rollstone's founders feel committing more time to the charity may lead to a big break for funding and name recognition. Dawidziak won't fully abandon his career but will take on jobs only for friends; Greene plans to keep only her part-time zoning job.

Dawidziak has taken on Rollstone's executive director tasks without pay, while Greene handles the annual gala. They dream of snagging a major corporate or celebrity sponsor who has adopted children. On top of speaking about Rollstone at business gatherings, clubs and other groups, Dawidziak said he will polish his grant-writing skills to pursue businesses and foundations grants, which he calls the next "logical approach" to boosting funds.

Last year, UNICEF put the number of orphans in the world at 147 million, up from the 143 million noted by Rollstone's founders when they researched the issue 15 years ago.

At an age when most are readying for retirement, Dawidziak feels the weight of the orphan plight. "I want my final years to be about doing good things," he said. "I'm not wasting my final years on self-pleasure. That's not my exit plan."

"I'll solve the problem for the one child. It is the starfish. It matters to that one."

## MORE ABOUT ROLLSTONE

The Rollstone Foundation was created in 2008 to help pay for adoptions of special-needs orphans. Its main fundraiser is an annual spring gala at the Mansion at Timber Point in Great River, scheduled this year for May 17.  
■ Website: rollstone.us

- Amount of grants given out: \$1 million
- Number of orphans helped: 540 children adopted in 46 states
- Number of countries involved: 30
- Top five countries: China, Ukraine, Bulgaria, Ethiopia, India