



## SAFE TODDLES

# 2023 IMPACT REPORT

Improving safe mobility for babies with a mobility visual impairment & blindness.

# Safe Toddles Impact Report 2023

*SAFE TODDLES MISSION is to provide parents with a white cane solution for keeping their babies with a mobility visual impairment or blindness safe to explore and learn.*

- |                                                                  |                                                                                          |
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*Chief of the Division of Pediatric Ophthalmology, Children's Hospital Colorado; Professor of Ophthalmology, University of Colorado School of Medicine*

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**Roslyn Adams** - Early Childhood Education

**Bob Sonnenberg** - Nonprofit Leadership

**Brent Weichers** - Manufacturing and Distribution

## THANK YOU FOR YOUR SUPPORT OF SAFE TODDLES

We are pleased to share the impact that your support made in 2023. We increased distribution of the Pediatric Belt Cane by 40 percent, with more than 600 Belt Canes shipped to parents and professionals in 36 countries. Furthermore, we provided educational support to families, caregivers, and professionals; enhanced our Pediatric Belt Cane curriculum; conducted testing to improve Belt Cane functioning; and programmed our first Smart Mobility app for smartphones. None of this would be possible without your support for our mission.

Since 2018, medical and educational professionals have embraced Safe Toddles' Belt Cane as a tool for addressing the walking needs of their patients and students. In 2023, medical professionals recognized that the Pediatric Belt Cane is a medical necessity for children with a MVI/B to walk. Children's Hospitals and Durable Medical Equipment suppliers now bill Medicaid for Belt Canes. Belt Canes are listed on students' individual service plans and purchased through state education funds. The Pediatric Belt Cane is the only solution for joyful walking and running because it allows children with a MVI/B to feel safe.

That's why 600 Belt Canes in one year—as proud as we are of that milestone—is just a tiny splash in an ocean of need. We estimate that around 2,000 children around the world have had their lives changed by the Belt Cane. However, every year in the United States, more than 5,000 babies are born blind or visually impaired. Globally, around seven million children aged 11 months to five years are severely visually impaired (World Health Organization, 2021). There are a great many children who would benefit from having a Belt Cane, yet too few people know about Safe Toddles and our mission.

Northern Illinois University completed a two-year study, funded by the Lavelle Fund for the Blind, in October of 2023. The findings of this study—that children with a MVI/B thrive when provided with a two-step safety buffer as they learn to navigate their world—affirmed the results of prior research. Safe Toddles' Belt Cane gives those children the ability to feel safe in any environment and participate in most activities essential for healthy growth and development.

Thanks to your support, our groundbreaking Pediatric Belt Cane—a first-of-its-kind device, and the world's only wearable white cane—offers a solution for people all over the world caring for blind babies. As we approach our 10th anniversary, we want to thank you for believing in our mission. As the only nonprofit dedicated to providing children with a MVI/B with a white cane solution designed specifically for them, our mission is as important now as it has ever been. We look forward to sharing more exciting updates with you as 2024 unfolds.

With gratitude,

Dr. Grace Ambrose-Zaken, *President & CEO*

Roxann Mayros, *Board Chair*





## ONGOING IMPROVEMENTS TO THE PEDIATRIC BELT CANE

In 2023, our R&D team focused their efforts on making the Belt Cane easier for children to use in even more settings. The result is that we are moving to a new tip design in 2024 – the Omni Wheel. In addition to being quieter and functioning better on a wider variety of terrain, the inclusion of these wheels makes it less likely that the Belt Cane will sway from side to side without the user's deliberate input.

Throughout our testing, we are listening to Belt Cane users and are committed to hearing what they have to tell us. We are learning together, and we are unwavering in our support of safe mobility for children with a MVI/B.



*The Omni Wheel will make the Belt Cane easier to use on a wider variety of terrain.*



**NICHOLAS** was born blind. He was 2 years old when his therapist recommended to his family to get him a Pediatric Belt Cane.

Before getting a Belt Cane, Nico would only take a few steps when he was holding on to a support walker or pushing a table ahead of him. The need to hold on to large objects limits a child's ability to engage with the world.

His parents wanted a Belt Cane to help him "explore his surroundings and give him the encouragement to start walking on his own."

Nico wears his Belt Cane and is walking on his own now. The power of safety is seen in every one of these children's stories. When children feel safe, they are free to take risks. Risks like running around inside a grocery store exploring the different packaging and paths through the aisles.

Nico is learning the rules, like stay near the cart. He also is learning how to help mom put groceries in the cart. Nico is a bigger part of family life because he is independent.

*Nico is blind due to Acute Retinal Necrosis.*

# 2023 HIGHLIGHTS

**DR. AMBROSE-ZAKEN IS THE FOREMOST SCHOLAR** in the field of early intervention orientation and mobility for children with a MVI/B. She introduced the term “mobility visual impairment or blindness” (MVI/B), which specifically identifies a child for whom a white cane mobility tool—such as the Pediatric Belt Cane—is a medical and educational necessity.

A Small Business Innovation Research grant from the U.S. Department of Education’s Institute of Education Sciences supported the **DEVELOPMENT OF OUR NEW SMART BELT CANE** and accompanying SmartMobility app for smartphones. We created these innovations, in partnership with Soterix Medical, to assist families, caregivers, and professionals in easily accessing our Belt Cane curriculum and assessment features.

In 2023, the Pediatric Belt Cane was recognized by Medicaid to be **A MEDICALLY NECESSARY DEVICE** for infants with a MVI/B to walk.

Independent researchers from Northern Illinois University validated Dr. Ambrose-Zaken’s prior published research on the Belt Cane’s effects on the walking ability and daily physical activity of children under five with a MVI/B. Other independent **PEDIATRIC OPHTHALMOLOGIST INVESTIGATIONS ALSO AFFIRMED THE WALKING BENEFITS OF THE BELT CANE.**

**SAFE TODDLES CONTINUES TO INNOVATE AND IMPROVE ITS DESIGN OF BELT CANES.**

Children with a MVI/B and their families, as well as professionals, put these new designs to the test and provide us with feedback.

## FOUNDER SPOTLIGHT

# Yakir Katz & Edie Ambrose



Since Safe Toddlers' inception, former Safe Toddlers Board Members Yakir Katz and Edie Ambrose have provided critical support for its operating fund. With their recent gift, Safe Toddlers was able to expand its manufacturing capabilities to the current factory in Fishkill, NY. The Safe Toddlers factory serves as more than just a manufacturing hub- it is a center of innovation, producing the Pediatric Belt Canes that are transforming the lives of children with a MVI/B worldwide.

Yakir and Edie's commitment to our mission extends far beyond financial support as they have both served tirelessly on our Board, offering invaluable insights and guidance that have advanced our mission.

We extend our heartfelt thanks to Yakir and Edie for their unwavering support and partnership in our mission to ensure that babies with a MVI/B can learn to walk and explore safely and independently. We would not be where we are today without their longtime support and friendship.

## NEW RESEARCH FINDINGS

Northern Illinois University's two-year study of 124 participants, funded by the Lavelle Fund for the Blind, asked parents: *Why do you want a wearable white cane?* Parents revealed that their children's visual impairment made it unsafe for them to move about without help, and that they were seeking a mobility tool for their children's safety.

In the 50 participants who had the potential to walk, NIU studied their walking ability and amount of physical activity both before and after the introduction of a Belt Cane. Before using the Belt Cane, the children with a MVI/B spent 80 percent of their time sitting down, standing still, or walking while holding onto someone for support. After being introduced to the Belt Cane, these same children spent 80 percent of their time walking or standing independently. Children who previously relied on adult assistance simply to stand were now able to stand, and even move about, without any help other than their mobility tool because they felt safe and secure wearing their Pediatric Belt Canes.



**EASTON** was 18 months old when his therapist recommended to his family to get him a Pediatric Belt Cane.

Before getting a Belt Cane, Easton was as able to walk, but his lower vision isn't developed. That means, he will often get tripped up on different surfaces, steps, etc. The result is he needs to hold a hand to be safe when walking, because lower field loss is very tricky.

Easton can see in his upper field that his mom is near, but he can't see the drop-off just below him. This causes him to take a step towards his mom and fall, because he didn't see the drop off.

His parents wanted a Belt Cane "to help Easton navigate new places without missing and tripping on different items or surfaces."

In the pictures, Easton is learning to navigate in a hospital. He is feeling the braille/tactile sign and learning about his world. His parents can stand back and allow him to explore to on his own.

*Easton is mobility visually impaired due to Optic Nerve Hypoplasia.*

# Testimonials

*Safe Toddles receives emails and videos daily from families and professionals around the world. In these messages, parents are seeking safe mobility solutions for their children who are afraid to walk. We see the damage caused by insisting infants with a MVI/B walk unaided by a mobility tool or a helping hand. We see proof positive; blind babies are not safe to walk independently without protection. Safe Toddles is about helping parents of these beautiful babies with a MVI/B to be assured of the natural right of their children to feel safe all day long. These testimonials show, if you want your children with a MVI/B to walk, make them feel safe. It's really that simple.*

**KATIE GRIFFIN & TINA MEKEEL**  
of *Vision Forward*, Milwaukee, WI

We have found that children that use the Pediatric Belt Cane explore more with their hands while moving, take more steps independently, and they talk more about what they are finding with their hands and their Belt Canes. As a result, when it is time for our little ones to start using a long cane, they are actually walking, moving, and exploring their surroundings. We also have seen parents step back and let their children explore and move in their environments without holding their hand for the first time.”

**JENNY**, Northern California

I am the step-grandmother of a four-year-old boy. He was born with cortical visual impairment and he was afraid to walk. He lacked confidence. The Belt Cane has made the difference. He is confident and happy. His first words were “Belt Cane.” He asks for it by name. Thank you, Safe Toddles, for the gift that you have given our family. Your invention should win the Nobel Prize.”

**STEPHAN**, Rotterdam, Netherlands

After seeing the toddler belt on TikTok, we are very interested. We are a family from the Netherlands with our youngest son being blind from birth. He is almost six, but walking is still behind. He walks from door to table. But we think he needs other help to gain trust and walk better. Here in the Netherlands, there is no such help as the Belt Cane. So, we are wondering if it is possible to order one and ship it to the Netherlands? Thank you very much for the time and response.”



## DONOR SPOTLIGHT

# Gary N. Solomon



At the heart of every thriving community lies individuals like Gary N. Solomon, whose commitment to philanthropy transforms lives. His generous support of the Gary Solomon Grant Writer Initiative has made a profound impact on ensuring the safety and well-being of children worldwide.

Solomon is a business leader and philanthropist in New Orleans, LA. He and his wife, Martha, manage Crescent Bank and Trust with more than 25 years of diverse entrepreneurial endeavors, including franchise locations of Ruth's Chris Steak House, and numerous real estate developments. The primary business operated by the Solomons today is Crescent Bank, which has 600 employees in 18 states.

Solomon's contributions not only reflect his compassion for the well-being of children but also his belief in the power of community-driven initiatives. By investing in Safe Toddlers, Solomon has demonstrated his commitment to creating a safer and more nurturing environment for some of our society's most deserving members.

As we shine a spotlight on Gary N. Solomon's remarkable generosity, we extend our deepest gratitude to his dedication in helping advance our mission. His support serves as an inspiring example of how individual philanthropy can ignite positive change and build stronger, safer communities for generations to come.

## OUR PROGRAMS

### Educational Initiatives

- Pediatric Belt Cane Online Curriculum
- Safe Toddlers Workshops Near You Education Tours
- Virtual Q&A for Prospective, New, and Long-time Belt Cane Users
- *Next Steps: Safe Toddlers Newsletter*
- Certification Program for Training Professionals

### Digital Educational Outreach

- “The Stories of Triumph Over Blindness-Related Walking Delays” Video Series
- “Safe Toddlers Talks Orientation and Mobility” Podcast

**SOPHIE-GRACE** was just shy of 2 years old when her therapist recommended to her family to get a Pediatric Belt Cane.

Before getting a Belt Cane, Sophie was able to walk, but her parents saw her freeze and cry every time the walking surface changed colors, and she tripped over obstacles she didn't know were in her way. After all those falls and trips, Sophie-Grace seemed to always want to hold her mom's hand - she didn't feel safe to let go, so she couldn't join in on the fun.

Her family hoped the Belt Cane would enable her “to explore her surroundings safely and interact with her peers.”

Since having the Belt Cane in front of her to warn her of the bumps, drops and other changes in her path she has become very independent. In the bottom picture, she is confidently stepping down a curb. In the top picture, Sophie is climbing her way through a play scape designed to challenge kids her age in ways they find rewarding.

Her mom was able to stand back and watch her little girl safely and independently climb, slide, and have fun with her friends.

*Sophie-Grace is mobility visually impaired due to a combination of Cortical Visual Impairment, Optic Nerve Hypoplasia, and Optic Albinism.*



# Empowering Tomorrow:

## THANK YOU FOR YOUR INVESTMENT IN OUR VISION FOR THE FUTURE

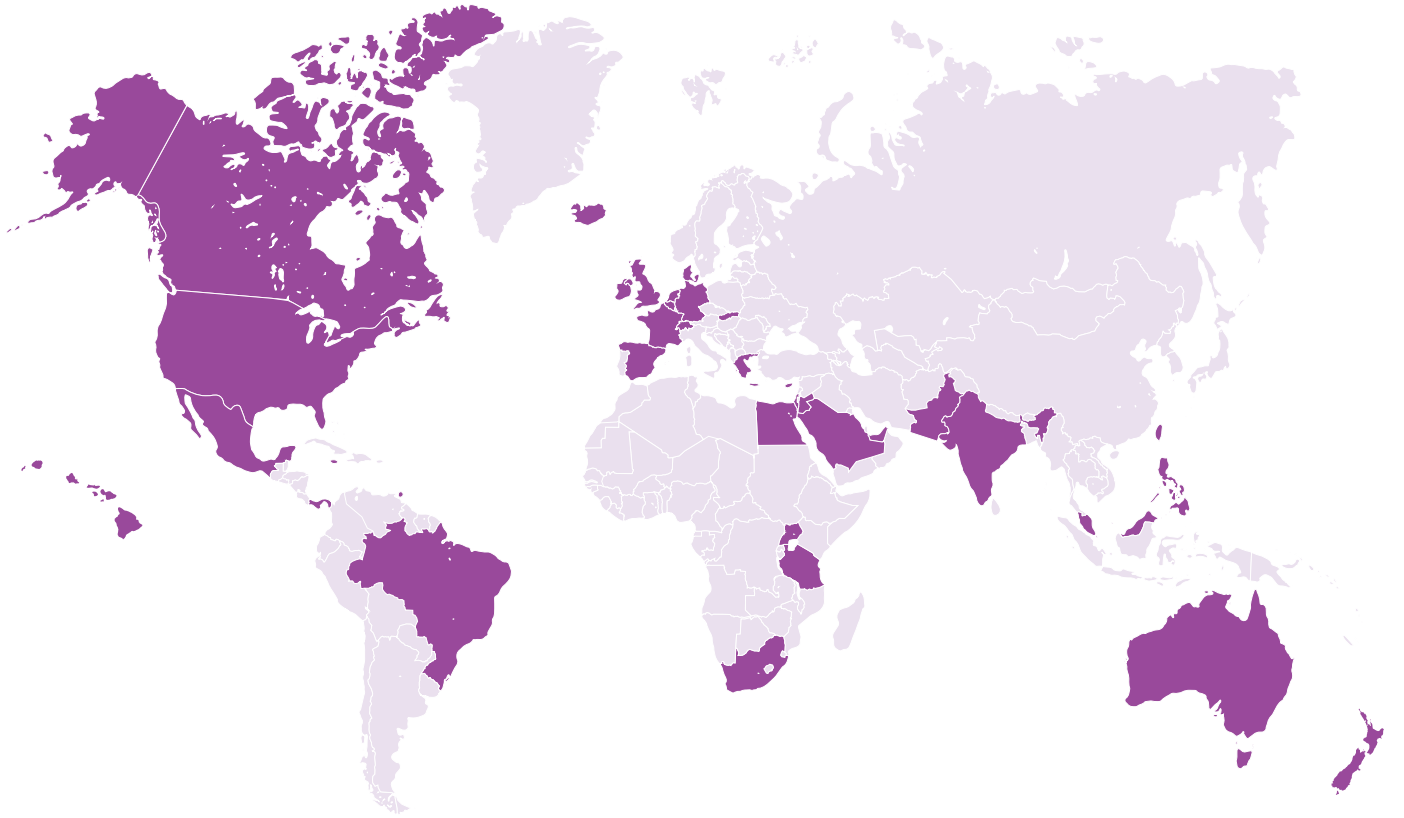
Our gratitude to our dedicated supporters for making 2023 our most successful fundraising campaign yet. We would like to offer special thanks to Edie Ambrose and Yakir Katz for believing in Safe Toddlers from the start and providing the support we needed to open our first factory in Fishkill, NY; the William G. and Helen C. Hoffman Foundation for helping us bring the Pediatric Belt Cane to metropolitan New York and New Jersey; Gary N. Solomon for kickstarting our professional development efforts and helping us to develop our grant writing function; and the Pharaoh C. Thompson Foundation for hearing our story and responding immediately with a gift of 25 Belt Canes.

We are grateful to our Medical Advisory Committee for actively spreading the word to medical professionals about Safe Toddlers' work. Dr. Robert Enzenauer, pediatric ophthalmologist, met Safe Toddlers at VISION 2023 and immediately became a valuable ally in our mission; our website redesign was an incredibly generous and impactful gift from him. Under the advisement of Dr. Enzenauer, Paul Chong, fourth year Army HPSP medical student at Campbell University School of Osteopathic Medicine, will share the outcomes of their research at multiple ophthalmology conferences in the US

and Canada this year and next, including being accepted to present their paper during the first whole conference group panel of papers given after the Keynote at the American Association of Pediatric Ophthalmology & Strabismus (AAPOS). And Professor Anne L. Corn has been with us since the beginning. It's hard to imagine where Safe Toddlers would be now without her.

Thank you to our Community Advisors—Dr. Kirk and Roslyn Adams, Brent Weichers, and Bob Sonnenberg—for helping us make vital connections within our community. These highly respected, amazing leaders in the field of visual impairment and blindness understand the urgency of our message that safe mobility for infants with a MVI/B is a medical necessity and the Pediatric Belt Cane is the tool that allows parents to keep them safe to walk and learn.

Our Board of Directors is composed of incredible leaders in their fields, who have tirelessly donated their time and talent to Safe Toddlers' success and growth. We convened in person last August at our headquarters in Fishkill, NY, to create our two-year strategic plan. Later this year, we'll be meeting in Charlotte, NC, thanks to a room donated by Board Member, Dr. Joyelle Harris and AER International Conference.



## OUR DISTRIBUTION: A WORLDWIDE IMPACT

**Safe Toddles Belt Cane** has been sold to all 50 United States as well as 36 countries around the globe.

Australia  
Belgium  
Brazil  
Canada  
Cyprus  
Denmark  
Egypt  
France  
Germany

Greece  
Iceland  
India  
Ireland  
Israel  
Jamaica  
Jordan  
Malaysia  
Mexico

Netherlands  
New Zealand  
Pakistan  
Panama  
Philippines  
Saudi Arabia  
Singapore  
Slovakia  
South Africa

Spain  
Switzerland  
Taiwan  
Tanzania  
Trinidad & Tobago  
Uganda  
United Kingdom  
United States



# Sustaining Members

Safe Toddlers is where we are today because of the continued support from its Sustaining Members. We received \$31,000 from Sustaining Members in 2023, helping provide Belt Canes to families who need them.

Nehemie Guillomaitre  
Julie Mattingly  
Mary Beth Calhoon  
Lynda Goetz  
James Washington  
Jarrett Cruger  
Kristen Lamb  
P X Hadebe  
Anthony Kamperschroer  
Hessa Al Hammadi  
Elsa Santiago  
Stephanie Enyart  
Anna Norman  
Sharon Woods  
Monty Carter  
Anthony Fischer  
Pavlina Samcikova  
Shirley Pack  
Deseri Ann Gonzalez  
Robin Faircough  
Ryan Preuss  
Carrie Purser  
Carrie Hargrave  
Amy Payton  
Anita Glade  
Stefano Filiberti  
Ritchell Roach  
Donna Mitchell  
Mari Norris  
Zabrina Delgado  
George & Carla Cruger  
Corbin Ford  
Nicholas Kappes  
Steven Pawel  
Krystal Moore  
Karen Parks  
Maryam Ayir  
Nathaniel Braman  
Maryanne Cullinan  
Denise DeBelius  
Anna Gaugler  
Amolak Gill  
Shelby Gill

Julie Gomstyn  
Brad Hetrick  
Adam Hopkins  
Kari-Anne Leong  
Bailey Jarman  
Julie Kelley  
Holly J. Lebed  
Wicksell Metellus  
Barry Rusell  
Matthew Simmons  
JoAnna Smith  
Nitin Venugopal  
Kenneth Voet  
Angela Wesley  
Maura Wheeler  
Matthew Zimo  
Melissa LLC  
Ayaan Ali  
Matthew Beck  
Jennifer Borst  
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Michael Byington  
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Giselle Dino  
Shirley Genander  
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Amanda Kosinski  
Kathleen Kutch  
Sylvia Leggett  
Cindy Luhman  
Sean Maharg  
Marian Ceramics  
Teresa Mashue  
Na-Keta Michael  
Pyone Lei Lei Mon  
Heidi Moore  
Hanan Muhajab  
Richard Murphy  
Celeste Padilla  
Marilyn Pearce  
Mark Pisco

Phyllis Priest  
Mireille Roy  
Taryn Saylor  
Brett Schmidt  
Karl Simon  
Charlyn Speed  
Guerdy St Louis  
Theodore Stein  
Caleb Sutton  
Robert Å uver  
Chris Tabb  
Chelsie Thompson  
Kathleen Zeider  
PearlJunora Zenon  
Denise PIPps  
Mary Lasiter  
Margaret O'Keefe  
Liz Stewart  
Joan Dulitz  
Joy Harris  
Jennifer Letowt  
Scott Barkdoll  
Sonya Steele  
Hikmat Sarwan  
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Judy Fox  
June Allison  
Jennifer Hisrich  
Nicole Allen  
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Sabreaux Alliton  
Kandrisa Alston  
Juliana Cochran  
Brittany Disorbo  
Chloe Fitzgerald

Molly Malone  
Anthony May  
Jethro Munder  
Lance Storms  
Carla Ward  
Brianna Bruce  
Alicia Crawford  
Monica DeGonzalez  
Khadija Abdurahman Haji  
Sasha Nelson  
Sonya Palafox  
Danielle Twum  
Ana Velarde  
Thembi Watson  
Cheryl Fry Roe  
Ronald Staiger  
Tanya Gonzales  
Ronald Ritter  
Laurie Wright  
Robert Rudner  
Jenna Novess  
Karina Williams Wheeler  
Hansel Chacon  
Elizabeth Beattie  
Marjorie Kaiser  
Stephenie Ambrose Tubbs  
Suzanne Secrist  
Cheyenne Appiah  
Adama Sender  
Therry Simien  
Bob Sonnenberg  
Shantal Alston James  
Richard Cortez  
Lawrence Fannin  
George Poubouridis  
Adefunke Ajala  
Haroun Askar  
Cameron Beech  
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Vic Cunlet  
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Belinda Cassius  
Hansa Dhokia  
Willis Leroy  
Cormac Funge  
Aaron Howell  
Hellofs Laurent  
Taylor Vracin-Harrell  
Jamila Wallace  
Aleah Padgett  
Martha Bass  
Elizabeth Burton  
Fatima Dadabhoy  
Tracy DeLuca  
Blair Ednie

Laurie Hall  
Judi-Ann Lambert-Link  
Emrick Mareski  
Megan O'Hara  
Edgar Vargas  
Allen Sonstein  
Amy Yurko  
Haley Strickland  
Dhyan Atkinson  
Julia Vasquez  
Akhona Bhengu  
Menachem Blesofsky  
Tabitha Chester  
Patricia Coscia  
George Cundale  
Amanda DeLuca  
Nicole Etienne  
Joy Fisher  
D'Shanal Fowler  
Kathryn Hallahan

Dakota Jacobs  
Jean Jooste  
Kayla Kenney  
Raphael Kapth  
James Kracht  
Ben Murrell  
Fatine Oliveira  
Megan Rosendahl  
Michael Ross  
Samira Ahmed  
Ashley Arends  
Zach Egenberger  
Majid Latif  
Tia Nelson  
Richard Steward  
Jad Suleiman  
Skye Summers  
Kiara Zaugg  
Andy Kahn  
Elisheva Seeve

Lubhna Saiyed  
Kim Love  
Ashley Dobson  
Victoria Ortega  
Nafisa Bakkar  
Kinnie Diella  
Ashley Gonzalez  
Amy Woolley  
Majid Riaz  
Maureen Reggie  
Nyima Yaffa  
Rami Flowers  
Stephanie Bittner  
Temi-tope Y Okubadejo  
Aniah Brown  
Myla Fountain  
Reuben Mishan  
Daniel Loor

## Friends of Safe Toddles

Friends of Safe Toddles represents a special group of individuals, foundations, and corporations who have committed to annual gifts between \$1,000 and \$9,999. The financial support from this dedicated group enables us to remove all barriers to children with congenital or early onset MVI/B obtaining the Pediatric Belt Cane, and to educate their families on how to integrate the Belt Cane into all parts of the child's daily routine.

### **PROTECTOR** \$5,000 to \$7,500

Jo Anne Snow Grimshaw  
Marom Bikson  
Pharaoh C. Thompson Foundation  
Charles Mueller

### **SUPPORTER** \$2,500 to \$4,999

Karen and Gary Rose  
Anne Corn  
Roxann Mayros  
Robert Israel

### **FRIEND** \$1,000 to \$2,500

Constance Engelstad  
Kathleen Weisberg  
Gordon H. "Nick" Mueller  
James Hudson  
Mike Carey  
Marlene & Michael Nissenblatt  
Dawn Werner

# The SafeT Society

The SafeT Society comprises generous individuals, foundations, and corporations who contribute \$10,000 or more to Safe Toddles annually. Their steadfast support ensures transformative measures that guarantee accessibility, independence, and safety for children with a MVI/B.

## INNOVATOR

\$300,000+

Lavelle Fund for the Blind  
Soterix Medical, Inc.  
Research Subcontract

## PIONEER

\$50,000 to \$99,999

Edie Ambrose and Yakir Katz  
of Stephen Ambrose Tours

## LEADER

\$25,000 to \$49,999

City College of CUNY  
Marom Bikson  
William G. and Helen C.  
Hoffman Foundation  
Gary N. Solomon

## CHAMPION

\$10,000 to \$24,999

Grace Ambrose-Zaken



Legal support  
donated by







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TODDLES**

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