

A Life-Saving Mission

An Interview with Richard C. Shadyac Jr., President and Chief Executive Officer, ALSAC

EDITORS' NOTE Richard Shadyac Jr. was named the President and Chief Executive Officer of ALSAC, the fundraising and awareness organization for St. Jude Children's Research Hospital (stjude.org), in July 2009. He serves as ALSAC's sixth CEO since the organization's founding in 1957. As the top healthcare charity in the U.S., ALSAC employs nearly 1,700 team members who operate from its headquarters in Memphis, Tennessee, and in territories and offices across the country.



Richard C. Shadyac Jr.

ALSAC relies on generous supporters and volunteers who make donations and support tens of thousands of fundraising activities annually to help support the mission of St. Jude: Finding cures. Saving children. Shadyac has led ALSAC to record-breaking achievements, guiding strategic efforts that have more than tripled fundraising revenue since the start of his tenure and have elevated St. Jude as an iconic brand. ALSAC also earned the recognition of the #1 Best Workplaces for Innovators from Fast Company magazine in 2020 and St. Jude has been recognized as the Top Health Nonprofit Brand of the Year for nine years in a row by Harris Poll Equitrend as a result of Shadyac's vision and leadership. Key strategic initiatives he launched include enhanced fundraising and awareness efforts in digital, gaming, social platforms, fitness, and multicultural areas, expanded marketing and donor development strategies, progression in ALSAC's digital transformation journey, innovation and a reimagining of the organization. Shadyac established culture pillars for the organization that focus on people first, high performance, innovation, collaboration, service and being strategic. Prior to becoming President and CEO, Shadyac served as the Chairman and President of the ALSAC Board of Directors. He joined the Board in 2000 and also served as the Vice Chair and was active on several Board committees. Shadyac was a practicing attorney for 27 years and worked as a managing partner in the Washington DC/Northern Virginia law firm Feldesman Tucker Leifer Fidell, LLP and led the firm's Virginia offices located in Falls Church. He has been a member of the District of Columbia Bar, the Virginia State Bar, the Virginia Trial Lawyers Association, the American Bar Association, and the Arlington and Fairfax County Bar Associations. In addition to his responsibilities as President and CEO of ALSAC, Shadyac leads community enhancement efforts by serving on the board of Memphis Tomorrow, an

organization for the CEOs of the largest employers in Memphis, and on the board for the Memphis Medical District Collaborative. He has helped to lead rebranding efforts for the city of Memphis to draw businesses, professionals and tourists to the city as well as enhance the perception of hometown residents. Shadyac has received several awards and recognitions including the 2017 Ellis Island Medal of Honor, 2016 CEO of the Year Award from Inside Memphis Business, and A Person for Others Award from Marquette University. He became the only nonprofit executive to ever receive the Responsible CEO of the Year Award from Corporate Responsibility (CR) Magazine in 2016, and he was honored by the American Task Force for Lebanon and the René Moawad Foundation for public service. In 2019, he was recognized by Memphis Magazine for his contributions to the city. Shadyac is a recognized thought leader and has contributed to several major publications including The Huffington Post, Fortune, and the Daily Memphian, among others. He earned a BA in political science from Marquette University and a law degree (JD) from Loyola University in Chicago.

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Will you highlight the history of ALSAC and how the organization has evolved?

The story of St. Jude Children's Research Hospital began with our founder, Danny Thomas, who was one of the biggest radio, film, and television stars of his day. His goal was to create a hospital that focused on pediatric cancer treatment and research – with a promise that no family would ever receive a bill from St. Jude. Danny intentionally chose to take on an incurable disease, acute lymphoblastic leukemia, the most common form of childhood cancer, which had a survival rate of 4 percent at the time. He also decided to locate St. Jude in Memphis, Tennessee, a segregated city in 1962 because he wanted to help desperately ill Black children who were at the time routinely turned away from hospitals around the South simply because of the color of their skin. When St. Jude opened its doors in 1962, it made history as the first fully integrated children's hospital in the South, welcoming children of all races, creeds and religions, and removing financial barriers as well.

Beyond the construction, Danny had to find a way to fund the day-to-day costs of the institution. So, he turned to his fellow



The campus of St. Jude in Memphis, Tennessee



The Pop of Art studio enables patients and siblings to continue creative pursuits while receiving care at St. Jude

Americans of Arabic-speaking descent and asked for their support. They responded, eventually forming the American Lebanese Syrian Associated Charities (ALSAC) in 1957. Since then, ALSAC has been responsible for all fundraising and awareness efforts for St. Jude. While this began as grassroots support, our reach has evolved in monumental ways. Unlike in 1962, we can now connect with donors around the globe 24/7. We are utilizing cutting-edge technology to sharpen our efforts and meet audiences where they are. From hosting virtual events, which aided us during the COVID-19 pandemic, to working alongside the Polaris Dawn civilian spaceflight crew to increase access to quality medical care through Starlink satellite systems in some of the most remote areas of the world, we are blasting through barriers not only to raise funds for our life-saving mission, but also to bring awareness to healthcare inequities around the globe.

We have continuously evolved our fundraising to meet the growing needs of St. Jude, which is in the midst of a \$12.9 billion strategic plan – the largest in the institution’s history – to accelerate progress in research, survival rates, and quality of life for survivors of childhood cancer and other catastrophic diseases around the world.

How do you describe the mission of St. Jude?

St. Jude Children’s Research Hospital is leading the way the world understands, treats, and defeats childhood cancer and other life-threatening diseases. Families never receive a bill from St. Jude for treatment, travel, housing or food – so they can focus on helping their child live. Because of generous donor support, St. Jude can provide children cutting-edge treatments, not covered by insurance, at no cost to families.

St. Jude cares for some of the world’s sickest children regardless of their race, ethnicity,

beliefs, or ability to pay. Our patients receive the customized care they need no matter what barriers they may face.

When St. Jude opened, childhood cancer was considered incurable. Since then, St. Jude has helped push the overall survival rate from 20 percent to more than 80 percent. In many developing countries, however, that statistic is sadly reversed – only 1 out of 5 children diagnosed with cancer will survive. We won’t stop until no child dies from cancer, no matter where they live. And St. Jude has achieved a 94 percent survival rate for the “incurable” leukemia, up from 4 percent in 1962.

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What have been the keys to St. Jude and ALSAC’s success and impact over many years?

The unique operating model of ALSAC and St. Jude – one organization focused on fundraising and awareness, the other on treatment and research – was innovative, and it has allowed the two organizations to remain on parallel paths of leading in their respective spaces by staying laser focused on our missions.

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Several other things come to mind that have been crucial to ALSAC’s success including transparency, storytelling and innovation. Transparency is all about trust. If we want people to engage with our brand and donate to St. Jude Children’s Research Hospital, we must be transparent about what their donation will be going to and demonstrate the impact. Second, a story possesses power. Patients and families walk into St. Jude during what is likely the most challenging time in their lives, and they find hope. We are incredibly passionate about telling authentic and inspiring stories that build awareness of the life-saving work that is taking place at St. Jude while also motivating others to help make our world a better place. Third, innovation is necessary, and it starts with being courageously and intellectually curious. I encourage our employees to expand their knowledge, explore the use of new technology and evolve the way they work in an effort to continuously grow as professionals and transform the way our organization conducts business.

All these efforts have made St. Jude an iconic brand today, but there is always an opportunity to take this mission to one more person, and that’s an opportunity my team and I relish every day.

Will you provide an overview of your role leading ALSAC and how you focus your efforts?

I focus my efforts on our employees, key partnerships, strategic initiatives and positioning our organization and our mission for the future. Some key priorities for me are ALSAC’s continued digital transformation and that we are constantly evolving to be a more audience-led organization through the strategic use of data that allows us to create richer experiences for our supporters.

It is also important to me to spend my time meeting and thanking our incredible supporters. I attend as many of our events around the country as I can so I can be face-to-face with the generous donors and volunteers who share in ownership of the incredible, life-saving mission that I’ve had the honor of serving my entire life.

Will you discuss ALSAC’s culture pillars and its focus on people first?

Culture is defined by people. It’s what they believe, how they act, where they work, and how they treat each other. At ALSAC, we strive to live by our five Culture Pillars, the qualities that set the foundation for our success: People First, Strategic, Innovative, Collaborative, and High Performing.



The Inside Out play areas provide indoor and outdoor spaces where kids can be kids, and where adults can sit and watch

People First is listed first for a reason: people make our mission possible. That's why developing our talent is also at the center of our strategic plan. We must have a growth mindset – which means leveraging our differences, recruiting and retaining game-changing talent, and enhancing our skills to meet the challenges of today and tomorrow.

When we treat each other with respect, acknowledge each other's unique contributions, support each other's growth, and create an inclusive environment where everyone can thrive, people can do their best work.

How critical is it to enhance ALSAC's fundraising and awareness efforts in digital, gaming, and social platforms?

It is absolutely essential. You have to meet people where they are, and this is where they spend their time. Even just a few short years ago, not many of us could have imagined the impact digital technology or social media would have on modern-day business or fundraising. And yet, here we are. It is imperative that our fundraising and awareness efforts not simply keep pace with change, but stay ahead of the curve.

Innovation is key to staying relevant, and we pay close attention to the evolving digital world. For instance, over the last few years, we've partnered with many of the top gamers and content creators in the country to raise millions of dollars through livestreamed fundraisers on Twitch. This initiative is called St. Jude PLAY LIVE; it's a video game charity program that has raised more than \$50 million for St. Jude.

We will continue using every tool available to us to share the life-saving mission of St. Jude with donors around the world.

How critical is it for ALSAC to build a diverse and inclusive workforce?

Diversity of perspectives is absolutely mission critical. We are committed to building a

diverse workforce anchored in a culture where everyone knows they belong and can bring their whole, authentic selves to work. We celebrate differences to make a difference. We value diversity of thoughts, ideas, backgrounds, and perspectives, and we believe it is imperative to our success – it has been the fabric of our organization since its founding.

We also pay close attention to the expectations of younger generations. We want to know what they want to see from ALSAC/St. Jude, and how we can build their trust and understanding of the St. Jude mission. For example, we know Gen Z and millennials hold brands to a high standard, and we want not only to meet, but to exceed that standard. We have seen that young people tend to be more skeptical of brands and put greater emphasis on ethics and authentic organizational missions, and we know they are searching for ways to get involved and make a positive impact.

What do you see as ALSAC's responsibility to be engaged in the communities it serves and to be a force for good in society?

Our founder said, "success in life has nothing to do with what you gain in life or accomplish for yourself. It's what you do for others." Guided by this philosophy, service to others is included in the preamble to the ALSAC Constitution. ALSAC is "dedicated to the parable of the 'Good Samaritan,' to love and care for our neighbor, regardless of color or creed." That's why service is reflected in one of our core values: We humbly serve our mission, one another, our supporters and our local and global communities.

ALSAC employees do this by regularly volunteering our time and resources to benefit others. We are thankful to have opportunities to do this, in part, through our Corporate Social Responsibility initiatives that extend the spirit of service to the communities in which we live and work.

Beyond the communities we engage with in the U.S., we implement our unique model globally to educate and train foundation partners that are supporting children's cancer clinics around the world. ALSAC Global was established in 2018, along with the establishment of St. Jude Global by the St. Jude Department of Global Pediatric Medicine.

The single greatest determinant for outcomes in pediatric cancer is where a child lives. That's unacceptable, and St. Jude and ALSAC are uniquely positioned to make an impact on this startling global health inequity and help more of the estimated 400,000 children who develop cancer worldwide annually.

How do you define the keys to effective leadership and how do you describe your management style?

I believe in clear communication, transparency, innovation, empathy, courage, and leadership from every seat in our organization. But perhaps more than anything, I believe in servant leadership. We're a little different than a for-profit company in that we have a pure mission: Finding cures. Saving children. This means we must go above and beyond in how we serve our supporters and each other. If, say, a sudden rain shower interrupts one of our events, I expect our executives – and that includes me – to help wipe down chairs or do whatever else is necessary to ensure our supporters, who give so generously of their time and treasure, are served. Little things like these aren't little to me – they speak to who we are and how we serve those who do so much for us. That, to me, is servant leadership.

With all that ALSAC has accomplished under your leadership, are you able to take moments to reflect and celebrate the wins?

First, it's all about St. Jude – what the support ALSAC provides helps doctors and researchers at St. Jude accomplish. That's our true impact in the world.

In support of that, we are so grateful to have plenty to celebrate – St. Jude remains one of the strongest brands in the nonprofit world (nearly 9 out of 10 Americans recognize the brand), and we've been named the #1 Most Trusted Brand across all for-profits and nonprofits in the Most Trusted Brands of 2023 report by Morning Consult. It's humbling, and we don't take it for granted.

The most meaningful way we celebrate as an organization is by recognizing the impact of our work. We are blessed to have a number of childhood cancer survivors on our team who were treated at St. Jude and have dedicated their lives to giving back, as well as bereaved parents who have faced the unimaginable and now want to do everything in their power to prevent other families from experiencing the loss of a child. Seeing these survivors and family members, as well as the patients and families who are currently being treated right across the street from our headquarters on the St. Jude campus, and knowing they represent hundreds of thousands more around the globe who need our help, is our true motivation. ●