

Racing for Charity: Flat out for a good cause

28/04/2026 The Porsche Formula E Team is raising money for charitable causes via the Racing for Charity initiative. Simulator test driver Gabriela Jílková spent a day at the Freiburg Children's Heart Centre to see first-hand how the donations are put to use.

When she is in the simulator, Gabriela Jílková is unlikely to be thinking about heart surgery. The 31-year-old Czech racing driver is fully focused on lap times and set-up data. For years, she has been testing the Porsche 99X Electric for the Porsche Formula E Team, clocking up hundreds of kilometres in the digital cockpit, but also on real circuits. The data gathered in the course of her work ensures that factory drivers Pascal Wehrlein and Nico Müller are well prepared for every race.

Racing for Charity: donations for every lap completed

This season, the work of the Porsche Formula E Team has taken on an additional, perhaps unexpected, dimension. Through the Racing for Charity initiative, Porsche raises money – initially at the 24 Hours of

Le Mans and now in Formula E. For every racing lap completed, the company puts 400 euros into a pot to be split between three charitable organisations: Kinderherzen retten e.V., Interplast Germany e.V. and the Ferry Porsche Foundation. By the end of April, the current season had seen 388 laps covered, raising 155,200 euros.

On a Thursday in March, Jílková visited the University Heart Centre in Freiburg, with the aim of experiencing first-hand the important work carried out by Kinderherzen retten e.V. – and the impact of the Racing for Charity donations. While there she met 13-year-old Marek in the Department of Congenital Heart Defects and Paediatric Cardiology.

Kinderherzen retten e.V. was founded in 2002 by Professor Dr Friedhelm Beyersdorf, then Chair of Cardiac Surgery at Freiburg University Hospital. His mission was to expand the hospital's cardiac surgery services, including the establishment of a dedicated paediatric cardiac surgery unit.

“Paediatric cardiac surgery is something special in itself,” says Professor Beyersdorf. “It isn't possible everywhere in the world. But our people can do it.” He explains his motivation: “We are comparatively well off in Germany. I firmly believe that each and every one of us can – and should – give something back.”

That is why the professor and his colleagues work to help children from less developed countries whenever possible. “Children there die from conditions that we can treat relatively easily with the resources we have here,” says Professor Beyersdorf. The need is enormous: around one per cent of all newborns are born with a congenital heart defect.

Kinderherzen retten: help for Marek

Asked what she wishes for her son Marek's life, Maryna Kharytonava is clear: “That he becomes a good person.” For now, that wish appears to be coming true. Marek is 13 and a perfectly normal teenager. He likes football and his dog, finds school annoying and seems a little shy around strangers. He's already showing the first signs of maturing, despite still reacting with childlike delight to the fine weather on this March day in Freiburg, picking daisies on the large lawn in front of the university hospital. When Jílková gives him a 3D puzzle of a Porsche 911, his eyes light up.

Yet Marek's story is anything but ordinary – something his mother knows all too well. To her, he is nothing less than a triumph, here as a result of medicine, goodwill, friendship and generosity. “Without the support of so many good people and the work of Kinderherzen retten e.V., my child would no longer be alive,” she says, her voice trembling slightly.

Professor Dr Brigitte Stiller, Medical Director of the department, remembers February 2013 very clearly – it is when Marek was born, in Freiburg. “We knew he had a congenital heart defect,” Professor Stiller recalls – a defect that urgently needed to be corrected. “On the fifth day of his life, he underwent major heart surgery.” Without the operation? “Marek would probably have died within the first two weeks of

life," she says.

There would have been no chance to save Marek in his home country of Belarus. When his heart defect was diagnosed during pregnancy, doctors in Minsk dismissed the case, saying there was nothing they could do. Marek's parents, Maryna and Genia, began writing letters to friends and acquaintances, collecting donations across Europe, seeking information and building contacts. After many detours, his mother eventually arrived in Freiburg, with Brigitte Stiller – and Kinderherzen retten e.V. To this day, she says, she is overwhelmed by what is possible in Germany.

Thirteen years later, Marek is now facing another procedure. Since infancy, he has had a stent in a coronary artery to keep the vessel open. As he grows, the stent needs to be widened from time to time to match his increasing body size. This is done via a cardiac catheter – now for the third time. Even so, the procedure is far from routine for Marek. Of course he worries and feels a little afraid, he says. Brigitte Stiller reassures him with a pat on the shoulder: "We'll take good care of this," she promises, smiling at her young patient.

Support for children and their families

This optimism is not based solely on medical expertise and the skill of the staff. The entire children's heart centre radiates confidence. Light wells and skylights bring daylight deep into the building. The clinic is deliberately designed around the needs of young patients and their families – and that goes beyond medical excellence.

Over the years, a strong sense of community has developed. Children from all over the world who come to Freiburg with the help of Kinderherzen retten e.V. remain connected to the clinic for life. "Our children," Professor Stiller says when she talks about her young patients. "We support our children and their families over many years. And many who were once here as infants are now adults themselves, with children of their own, leading normal lives."

Jílková is deeply impressed. "For me, today was something completely new. I was very moved to meet Marek and his mother and to hear their story," she says. Life in the clinic follows a different rhythm from that on the racetrack – calmer, but just as highly focused. What unites both worlds, she says, is the determination to keep improving. "And never to stop fighting."

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