

REFLECTIONS ON THE EARLY YEARS

by Donald J. Fernbach, M.D.

The concept of the Ronald McDonald House, like so many other historical contributions, began in the city of Philadelphia. The Philadelphia Eagles and the McDonald restaurant owners combined their energies to assist Dr. Audrey Evans of the Children's Hospital Oncology Service in doing something for her patients and for the families of children with cancer. With the development of a "half-way" house under the name of the friendly clown, Ronald McDonald, the families could stay in comfort and convenience while the children were in the hospital or were receiving outpatient therapy.

Cancer not only is an expensive disease to treat, but the best treatment for children with cancer is to be found in the more sophisticated pediatric medical centers. For many families, this means leaving their hometown to travel to and stay in the nearest medical center. No health insurance plan covers the out-of-pocket costs for food and lodging and other incidentals while living away from home. Many of the treatments require long periods of hospitalization or long periods of time when it is essential that children be somewhat near the hospital providing the therapy. At the time of great emotional stress, leaving home means not only leaving a familiar environment but also leaving the close support of family members, neighbors and friends. Sisters and brothers have to be left behind, often in an atmosphere of bewilderment and fear. In retrospect, it is easy to see how rapidly the Ronald McDonald House became the "home-away-from-home." It is an incredible relief to tired nerves and sleep-weary bodies as well as a haven for families with similar problems who are in the best position to understand and share experiences.

Everyone can identify with the value of a low-cost lodging and most people can appreciate how much better this might be for emotionally distraught parents who would otherwise have to retreat to a strange and lonely hotel or motel room.

Having heard of the Philadelphia story from Dr. Evans and having learned of the development of the second Ronald McDonald House in Chicago, I contacted the local advertising executives for the McDonald restaurant cooperative in Houston. The local group was very receptive. They put me in touch with another pediatric oncologist, Dr. Ed Baum in Chicago, who had been placed on a newly formed National Advisory Committee for McDonald's because of a rapid increase in the number of inquiries about these houses. Next, it was necessary to interest some people who might participate.

When his son, Troy, was sick with lymphoma, Don Mullins had made it clear that someday he wanted to "help"--however he could. After listening to my description of the two existing houses, he said, "Let's go look," and so we invited ourselves to Chicago. The visit to the Chicago house told the whole story. The beautifully renovated old mansion had a friendly look from top to bottom including the living rooms, bedrooms, play areas, kitchen, laundry room, and a host of other amenities. That look was all it took and the Houston house was on its way. The second parent to become involved was Liz Kelley, whose son Sean had leukemia. Liz, too, had been after me for a long time to "do something"! Now was the time and never was there a more energetic dynamo.

The Houston McDonald's group at that time had a husband and wife team, Margaret and Dave Rich, who jumped at this opportunity. Dave's sister had a child with leukemia so he understood the whole story. With his able leadership, the local McDonald cooperative rallied around and shortly pledged the single largest donation of any comparable group of McDonald organizations of any city in the country.

The snowball had begun to roll. In Philadelphia, the Philadelphia Eagles not only gave their support to the Ronald McDonald House, they offered to build a leukemia wing on the children's hospital. In Chicago, it was the Chicago Bears. It took little effort to bring Bud Adams and the Houston Oilers onto the organizing Committee. Bud is as strong a supporter today as he was then and the Oiler players, and especially the Oiler players' wives, have been involved in all kinds of activities to build and maintain the House.

One of my memorable moments during this gestation period was the time I posed with Dan Pastorini and Ken Burroughs in front of Texas Children's Hospital for one of the early public relations photographs. It was a cold, cold, windy day, the day after the Oilers had been "robbed" in the ice of Three Rivers' Stadium. Dan and Ken were battered and weary but nevertheless they spent the entire afternoon at Texas Children's Hospital signing autographs and visiting with the patients.

Not long after that episode, in response to letters I had written, the auditorium at Texas Children's Hospital was literally filled with parents, most of whom had lost children with cancer. The meeting was called the "Who-would-be-able-to-and-who-would-help-us-to-develop-a-Ronald-McDonald-House-in-Houston"? As might be expected, there was enough enthusiastic support to build ten Ronald McDonald Houses and although the evening had its tough moments, it was a warm and rewarding session.

From that point, Don Mullins collected his friends and Liz brought in hers, and we had attorneys, builders, designers, publicists and solid volunteers--and so the circle grew. Don found office space and hired Sandy Graf, an organizer par excellence. Sandy became the glue that held the project together. From that point on, it was meeting after meeting and the fundraising efforts collected steam with the rush and blast of a circus calliope. We talked to anyone, or any group who would let us present our proposal. Astonishingly, no one ever said no.

It would not be possible here to list everyone who had something to do with the development of our House but what a fantastic group of genuinely fine human beings.

After explorations around the medical center failed to turn up a suitable building to renovate, it became clear that Houston would have to build its own House from scratch. That meant a shift in direction to locate a piece of property and it also meant another major undertaking because now we needed a building plan. Thus, Curley Broadnax joined the group and he became the architect. Curley spoke with an esophageal speech because he had lost his larynx to cancer. He wanted to strike back! I had received the plan of the developing Los Angeles House, an atrium-style building with which Curley was an expert. One afternoon, Curley and I sat around his conference room table with his designers and listed everything we could think of that would be included in a Ronald McDonald House. Curley wanted the works. In all honesty, I did not ask

for "twice-as-much" in order to get "half-of-what-I-wanted", but when I gave Curley the list, he added more. By the time he was through and by the time our board was through, the House had gone from 15 to 18 to 21 rooms. The anticipated expansion had been included in the original structure.

Curley died before we opened the House but his job had been completed. His heart and enthusiasm are in every brick.

Meanwhile, Don Mullins had become President of the non-profit organization, The Oncology Services of Texas, Inc. He, along with his colleagues and with many of his own employees, assumed responsibility for the building project. Liz Kelley became the fundraiser and her committee's activities ranged from high school cookie bakes, skate-a-thons and schoolroom collections of pennies, nickels and dimes, to corporate donations of hundreds of thousands of dollars. No one was too big or too small to hear about the Ronald McDonald House. Liz would stick out her chin, clear her throat, and fire away. She never got tired. Every donation became a medal of reward for her committee. We talked to Kiwanians, Lions, Veterans, Rotarians, bankers, oilmen, radiator repairmen, clergy and trustees--we would talk to anyone who held still. But actually very little "selling" was required. Just as soon as people perceived the concept of the House, most of the services and materials were donated or provided at cost.

With as many people as ultimately became involved with the variety of committees and activities, there was a complete absence of animosity or friction. Oh, there might have been a little, but only because somebody wanted to do more of something too soon. Of particular interest was the curious fact that everyone really knew and appreciated that the Houston House would not likely be used by Houstonians, but by people coming to Houston from outside of the city "in fact" from other states or foreign countries. Everyone knows that our richest natural resource is our children, whoever they belong to.

How does one handle this kind of narrative summary? When so many people spend so much of their time to do so many things for so many other people, it is difficult to believe that things can be so bad in this old world. This was not the first Ronald McDonald House built and it was certainly far from the last. At the last count, in fact, there are well over 120 in the United States and a number of overseas versions. But this House was built by Houston Texans! It has no mortgage, it has a pure heart, and it has as much love built into it as the law and God allow.

Note: This article was written by Dr. Donald Fernbach, founder of the original Ronald McDonald House, opened – May 1981. In September 1997, the organization moved to a new and larger facility.