

A House With A Heart

By Dana Dietrich

Margo Szabo was only 3 days old when she was rushed to Children's Hospital of Philadelphia to undergo open heart surgery. She was born with transposition of the great arteries, which carries a 90% mortality rate if left untreated. After six months and two additional surgeries, Margo was finally on the road to recovery. Though her surgeries had been a success, the doctor's visits and hospital stays were not over. Margo's condition would still require regular hospital visits and check-ups with her doctors in Philadelphia.

The Szabos were not local to the Philadelphia area, and it was quite a commute for them to travel back and forth from Trenton to Philadelphia while Margo was being treated in the hospital. Also, they did not want to leave her alone in the hospital while they made the journey home. This left the Szabos in a precarious position. Do they attempt to contort themselves into comfortable sleeping positions in a hospital waiting room or scour an unfamiliar city for a hotel room?

The Szabo family was not alone in its dilemma. Fred Hill, a Philadelphia Eagles football player, had been in that exact situation when his daughter was sick in 1974. He had spent many nights sleeping in hospital waiting rooms, praying that his daughter would get well. While he was there, he noticed other families doing the same thing. He knew something had to be done. With the help of Jim Murray, the general manager of the Philadelphia Eagles, the team worked with Dr. Audrey Evans and McDonald's to build the very first Ronald McDonald House in Philadelphia. Their goal was to establish a place where families could find a comfortable bed, meals and a support network without the additional cost of hotels and food.

The very first “House That Love Built” was a small seven room facility located at 40th and Spruce Street. It quickly outgrew that facility and, in 1982, moved to a 19 room facility at 39th and Chestnut, where it is still located today. In 1995, an addition to the house increased the total capacity to 44 rooms. A second Philadelphia location at Front and Erie is currently in the final stages of completion and will have fifteen guest rooms. Beginning in 1974, the number of Ronald McDonald Houses has grown from one in Philadelphia to 245 throughout the world. They have served a total of 10 million families.

For the Szabos and countless other families the Ronald McDonald House is more than just a place to lay their heads. “The meal program and the shuttle services we provide are the two most welcomed services.” says Linda Parry, director of volunteers.

The house also has internet service, use of laundry and kitchen areas, and planned children’s activities.

In addition to providing services to residents, The Ronald McDonald House also tries to help parents deal with the financial and emotional burdens that come with having a sick child. “The cost of treatment is incredibly expensive, especially if you have to travel to get to that source.” Parry explains. “We have a social worker here who deals with the family issues, because, you know, families don’t normally have just one issue-a sick child. The world doesn’t stop for them while that child is ill.”

It is obvious to visitors who enter the Ronald McDonald House that it was designed especially for children. Whimsical playrooms invite children to enter a world of make-believe and forget about their treatments or sicknesses. The newest playroom allows children to show off their creative side with arts and crafts or to be entertained during movie nights. “PC Tree” has three computers to provide children with a kid-friendly internet experience.

For the adults, there is a large living room complete with televisions and comfy sofas. The spacious cafeteria has an abundance of tables and chairs where dinner is served every night at 6:00PM by the volunteers of the “Guest Chef Program”. “Audrey’s Café”, appropriately named after Dr. Audrey Evans, has video games, exercise equipment and a small kitchenette for the use of residents.

Occasionally, Szabo needed to stay at the Ronald McDonald House with her family while she underwent follow up treatments and check-ups. She has fond memories of the times she shared with her sister at the House. “My sister used to always like to play in wheelchairs, and I remember at the house they have wheelchairs people can borrow, so I would push her around because she wanted to pretend to be the sick patient and I would push her around. We used to just run around and make mayhem in that house.”

The paid staff is very small and, as a result, the Ronald McDonald House depends on an army of volunteers to keep the facility running. The original House at 39th and Chestnut has 250 volunteers to help with tasks such as answering phones, checking in residents, giving tours, preparing meals and helping with activities. The Front and Erie House will need approximately 150 volunteers to keep the new location functioning. Volunteers include people from various corporations in the area as well as area from churches, schools, hospitals and former residents. Linda Parry says, “We have a great group of volunteers. They really are wonderful to work with. They are not employees-they want to be here.”

Szabo is one of those residents who now volunteers at the Ronald McDonald House. Once a week, she helps out at the front desk, gives tours, and assists with household duties and activities. For example, on Halloween, she helped the kids “trick or treat” in the house. She

said, “They would knock on the door and say “trick or treat” and a family member would come out and give them some candy. That was fun.”

Szabo’s experiences with Children’s Hospital and The Ronald McDonald House have had a profound effect on her life. She is currently a psychology student at Drexel University and hopes to graduate in 2009. When asked what her goals are, she responded, “I actually want to work with kids, maybe in a hospital setting with chronic illnesses, something within the medical setting. My mom always told me she wanted me to be a heart surgeon and save other people’s lives. I’m not so good with the blood, so I’m trying to do it from a different angle.” She enjoys speaking to other cardiac patients and hopes her positive experience can help other families get through their ordeals. She tells patients, “I’m a success story from Children’s Hospital and the Ronald McDonald House.”