

A Welcoming Shelter During Life's Storms

Bend Ronald McDonald House helps families with ill children by offering a loving home away from home on hospital campus.

by Ronni Wilde, for The Bulletin Special Projects





When a child is seriously ill, life can spin out of control for the afflicted family. The accompanying heartache and stress can become a way of life, and families are sometimes forced to spend agonizing days and nights at the hospital.

When facing the crisis of a sick child, the Bend Ronald McDonald House swings its doors wide open for the entire family, providing a loving home away from home right on the St. Charles Medical Center premises.

"They provide everything here," said Kelisiano Fuiava, who has been living in the Bend Ronald McDonald House full-time since Oct. 24 while her baby, Jobias, is in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU) at St. Charles. "It helps a lot because I live in Warm Springs, and it's far away. This allows me to be a lot closer to my baby."

Kelisiano's mother, Valerie Fuiava, is also living in the house, and said she and her daughter have felt welcome and comfortable in the home during this time of need.

"We have our own room, and it's beautiful," said Valerie. "It's at no cost, so this is really a blessing for us. The staff here is so kind. They

have helped us a lot. When we have visitors, they are welcomed here too."

The Fuiavas came to the Ronald McDonald House after Kelisiano had an ultrasound at her doctor's office in Madras in October. The results showed that her baby might be born prematurely, so the doctor told her to go straight to the hospital.

"An ambulance brought us here to Bend because of the threat of early delivery," said Valerie.

The staff at St. Charles arranged for the mother and daughter to stay in the Bend Ronald McDonald House. Then, on Nov. 6, Kelisiano went into premature labor, as anticipated, and had an emergency cesarean-section. Baby Jobias was born weighing 2 pounds, 15 ounces, and was admitted into the NICU, where he has been ever since.

"It's a good thing we were here," said Valerie.

The Fuiavas spent Thanksgiving in the Ronald McDonald House, and other family came to the house to join them for dinner, Valerie said. The staff and volunteers provided for the family as though they were at home, she said, and they

all had a great time.

"They have a beautiful play room for kids, and volunteers even sanitize the room and clean the windows," said Valerie. "Volunteers come from all around Central Oregon to help."

As time allows, the families staying in the home also do chores around the house, including cleaning their own rooms, doing their own laundry, cooking meals and performing other kitchen duties.

Ronald McDonald Houses cater to women such as Kelisiano with high-risk pregnancies who need to be close to the hospital due to the threat of early labor, and provides a place for mothers and families of premature babies to stay while their tiny bundles are cared for in the NICU. It is also a home away from home for families of children with cancer or other serious illnesses or medical conditions, providing a place to stay that is right by the hospital.

The Bend house tends to be occupied mostly by parents of premature babies in the NICU at St. Charles, though families vacationing here whose kids get injured sometimes stay in the house while the hurt child is being treated. Babies and children from Central Oregon who have extremely serious conditions are sometimes transferred to Portland for treatment, and when that happens, the families can stay in a Ronald McDonald House near the hospital where their child is admitted.

"A large part of our care is for mothers in high-risk pregnancies," said Nanette Bittler, owner of

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— Valerie Fuiava**

seven McDonald's restaurants in Central Oregon and co-founder of the Bend Ronald McDonald house. "These moms need to be close to the hospital, then when the baby has to go into the NICU, they are right here. Can you imagine living in a rural community three hours away and having a high-risk pregnancy? It's terrifying," she said.

As McDonald's owners, Bittler and her husband, Mick, were familiar with Ronald McDonald Houses, and, realizing the huge geographic area that the St. Charles Medical Center services, she said they saw the need for a house in Bend.

"We had lots of families coming into Bend for medical services and they had nowhere to stay," she said. After a three-year feasibility study, the couple got approval from the global Ronald McDonald House Charities for a six-room house in Bend in 1994. St. Charles Medical Center donated the land space for the facility, and the house opened its doors in 1997, she said.

"This project is very dear to me," said Bittler. "It was a wonderful thing to bring it to Bend. We did this because I can't imagine a better gift to the community than to have a place to support families."

The Bend Ronald McDonald House, located at 1700 NE Purcell Blvd., is a charming lodge-style home with lots of inviting touches, including a large fireplace made from big timbers harvested from dying trees at Bend's Drake Park, said Jessica Jarratt Miller, CEO of Ronald McDonald Charities of Oregon and Southwest Washington.

"Wooden pegs were used in the house that individual members of the community nailed in, and

their names are posted in the great room around the fireplace," said Miller. "Our goal is to provide extra compassionate hospitality to every family who stays here."

Not only do the Ronald McDonald Houses offer a home for families, but they can also provide services such as pet therapy dogs, massages and passes to local hot spots.

The Bend house averages three families per night, Miller said, and funding comes from local McDonald's restaurants, direct donations, partnerships and fundraising events such as the "Have a Heart" campaign, during which local businesses sell paper hearts for \$1 that are then hung on the walls of the businesses.

"Every McDonald's has a donation box, and those donations add up to large amounts," she said. The "Stronger Together" 5K run/walk, which will take place in Bend in April 2017, is another annual big fundraising event. In addition to monetary contributions, the Bend house also welcomes donations of material goods and new, unwrapped toys year-round.

"Toys can be brought to the house or can be purchased for the house on the website through the 'get involved' link," Miller said. "The new, unwrapped toys and gifts will not only help holidays be brighter for the families, but will also stock a year-long treasure closet so that every child who comes to the house can select a new toy."

"It's really heartwarming to see the generous donations people bring," said Anna Pollino, a three-year volunteer at the Bend Ronald McDon-

ald House. "A woman recently came in and donated a large bag full of knitted hats for the children. She was very pleased to be able to do that."

Pollino, a retired educator, said she found the Ronald McDonald House in a list of volunteer opportunities in the newspaper when she moved to Bend three years ago, and came to the home to prepare a meal for the families.

"After that, I knew I wanted to stay. I feel peace and joy when I come here," said Pollino during one of her volunteer shifts. "This is the highlight of my week."

Pollino, who volunteers twice a week, spends her time answering phones, filing, giving tours of the home, assisting donors and helping families with whatever they might need.

"It's touching when you see the little babies get to go home after being in the NICU for so long," she said. "The families are so thankful that this is a comfortable place to be. The people who work here are very loving and caring."

After a long two-month fight to grow and become stronger, Baby Jobias is doing well now and is expected to go home to Warm Springs by Jan. 1, 2017. It's no doubt that having his mother at his side and living right next door during his stay at the hospital contributed to his improving health.

For more information about the Ronald McDonald house, visit www.rmhc.org. For information about volunteering in the Bend house, call Guest Services Director Teresa Braun at 541-318-4950.



Volunteers such as Anna Pollino, ensure that families who are staying in the Ronald McDonald House feel right at home in a clean and loving environment.

Donations of new, unwrapped toys and gifts help brighten the holidays for families staying at the Ronald McDonald House.