

Made to feel right at home

[John Howell](#)



DIRECTING A TOUR: Dan Cunningham of Warwick is a member of the Ronald McDonald House Board of Directors.

Cunningham said a study of the area serviced by Providence hospitals indicated they need 28 rooms, or 10 more than what they now provide. How those rooms will be added, and the cost, hasn't been determined. One option is to build up by adding another story to the white clapboard house, a sanctuary of hominess amidst the steel, brick and glass of surrounding hospitals and office buildings. Another possibility is reconfiguring the existing structure and eliminating such amenities as the boardroom, which also serves as the Christmas room at that time of year. That's the time when Cunningham visits the house in a red suit and wears a white beard. He loves his role.

Another view of the house's importance came from Dr. Joseph Bliss, who cares for newborns at Women & Infants'. He said of the 9,000 deliveries made annually at the hospital, 10 percent spend time in intensive care. For some it is a brief stay but others, especially those with less than 37 weeks pre-term, it can be weeks and even months.

He said maximizing development for these babies hinges on family-centered care. An important part is skin-to-skin contact with mothers and breast-feeding. He recommends the mother be present for the feeding every three hours, which can be difficult for a mother not within a short drive. That's where Ronald McDonald House steps in.

"It isn't just for convenience," says Bliss. "It makes for healthier children, too."

"We're here to help the families," Cunningham said of the 145 volunteers who give more than just their time. All the furniture is donated by Cardi's Furniture. Peter Cardi served on the original board that built the house 22 years ago. Johnson & Wales students cook meals for the house; Panera Bread regularly donates food; Hasbro donates toys; and Coke-a-Cola donates beverages. There are also arrangements giving families at the house access to the YMCA and the Jewish Community Center at no cost.

Operating funds are largely raised through donations and special events. The house operates on a \$930,000 budget, of which McDonald's provides 12 to 15 percent, said Jill Precopio, the director of development. The company played a huge role in getting Providence started. Families staying at the house are requested to make a \$10 donation per night.

Nicole won't be staying at the house that much longer, although her treatments will continue. She will be moving into a dorm room at Providence College, where she will study social work.

"This has been a great way to do a test run for college," she said.

That probably wasn't the founders' intention, but then there are many ways that just having a home can help.

Nicole Toscano is 19, uses a walker to get around and lives in Haverhill, Mass. But when she visits her medical team in Providence, she feels like she's coming home.

Since she was 15 and was diagnosed with reflex sympathetic dystrophy by physicians at Hasbro Children's Hospital, Nicole's home away from home has been the Ronald McDonald House. She stayed at the house for four weeks in 2009 and then for three months a year later while she underwent physical therapy and doctors worked out a plan to control her pain. Her diagnosis came as a shock for, until her joints started giving way, she was an active child and played sports.

"Things didn't work out as I had planned," Nicole told a gathering in the kitchen-dining area of the house on Gay Street in the shadow of Rhode Island and Women & Infants' Hospitals. Nicole said the convenience of the house was obvious, but it is the people that make it like home.

"The volunteers care so much about what they're doing," she said. "Whoever gets to stay here is so lucky."

Dan Cunningham of Warwick feels the same way about the house. He's not undergoing medical treatment and, obviously, if he was he wouldn't need the Ronald McDonald House. Cunningham is a member of its board of directors. He also spoke at Tuesday's luncheon, where perspective board members and volunteers learned about the house and its plans.



THERE TO HELP: Nicole Toscano (left) and Melanie Millspaugh, a volunteer at the Ronald McDonald House, have known each other for years.



LARGER THAN IT LOOKS: The Ronald McDonald House at 45 Gay St. in Providence has 18 rooms, which it makes available to families who need to be near a hospital while a family member undergoes treatment.