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’ Hospital. 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-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.

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