Aloha
From Our House to Yours
June 2008
Newsletter of Ronald McDonald House Charities® of Hawaii

Hilo teen, family a comfort to others

Jordan Toler is a young man just raring to move on with his life. The 14-year-old Hilo ninth-grader dreams of someday becoming a mixed martial arts fighter, a motocross racer and an architect. For now though, he finds himself biding his time at the Ronald McDonald House as he undergoes continuing treatments for acute myelogenous leukemia (AML) at Kapiolani Medical Center for Women & Children.

The Ke Ana La' Ahana School student keeps up with his schoolwork online.

Jordan has been a guest at the House on nine different occasions since being diagnosed in February 2006. When he is staying here, he is accompanied either by his mom Diana Liborio or grandmother Leona Toler, who take turns flying between Hilo and Honolulu to be with him.

His dad Samuel, eldest of Leona's six children, usually stays at home, working his two jobs and looking after the couple's other two children.

It certainly hasn't been easy. Because of all the traveling back and forth to Honolulu, Diana first had to take a demotion at her job and then she was layed off.

After Jordan's initial six-months of treatments, he was able to return to his Big Island home, but then suffered a relapse in August 2007. In January of this year, Jordan's youngest sister Kayana bravely volunteered to donate her bone marrow to help Jordan. Following the bone marrow transplant and a month of isolation, Jordan was allowed to check out of the hospital and return again to his second home, the Ronald McDonald House on Judd Hillside, where he is awaiting clearance from doctors to go back to Hilo.

In 2006, Jordan (back) received encouragement from Rica Ada (left) and Meredith Palafox, both of whom were being treated for cancer. Now, he returns the favor to the kids he meets.

When thrust into the world of life-threatening illness, children and families receive an uninvited but rapid and vivid educational experience that forces kids to grow up faster than they should have to, and requires them to deal with issues that a child shouldn't have to. Many families have described the experience as a roller coaster ride - only scarier. It seems as though it might overwhelm the youngsters, but instead, they rise to the occasion and show remarkable resilience and maturity.

Jordan Toler at the Ronald McDonald House with mom Diana Liborio

During these testing times, Jordan has been transformed from the shy 12-year-old we first met back in 2006 into what can only be described as a "big brother" to other seriously ill kids who are just beginning their journeys. "When I was just starting out, there were some other teens staying at the House that I enjoyed spending time with," he says. "We supported each other. I know it helped, so now I try to support the kids I meet."

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WISH LIST

GIFT CERTIFICATES
Wal-Mart
Costco
K-Mart
Sam's Club
Longs Drugs
Safeway
Gasoline gift cards
Pre-paid phone cards

HOUSEHOLD ITEMS
Laundry detergent
Fabric softener
Non-stick pots & pans cookware
Paper towels & plates
Toilet paper
(individually wrapped)
Ziplock bags
Aluminum foil
Plastic food storage containers

FOOD ITEMS
Rice
Saimin
Sugar
Flour
Cooking oil
Fresh fruits & vegetables
Frozen meals (microwave)
Individually wrapped snacks
Miscellaneous canned goods

MISCELLANEOUS
Rolls/sheets of postage stamps

A Message from our Executive Director

Jerri Chong

Some people think that a Ronald McDonald House must be a sad or at least a very somber place because of the gravity of the families' situations - and we do make sure that it is easy for guests to find a quiet corner somewhere in our large homes or our soothing gardens for times of quiet reflection. Of course, for even more solitude they have their private rooms.

But it is really the sounds of children's laughter; families happily preparing meals and sharing activities together; and the warm feeling of Ohana that anyone who pays us a visit will remember. Ronald McDonald House is a place of hope and a place of nurturing, where kids go on being kids and parents have the ability to hold on to family unity and dignity during a child's serious illness.

If you're a parent, you remember all the things like your child's first words, first tooth, etc. For some families, those types of milestones take place right here at Ronald McDonald House during their stays. These important times are enthusiastically shared by families and staff alike.

Recently, a precocious two-year-old from Western Samoa named Junior took his first unsteady steps right in front of the Judd Hillside House - steps that meant a lot to all of us since Junior was born with extremely serious problems with his legs.

All the little guy had known his whole life was surgeries, casts, and a lot of discomfort. But even during his really painful and difficult days he would break into the most endearing smile you can imagine. Before walking for the first time, he also started talking while he was here and delighted us so much as he proudly and repeatedly shouted out his first words - our names!

Junior Auelua's first steps

Yes, it is very special here - and it has been a very busy spring. Both of our Ronald McDonald Houses have been running at 100% occupancy. Families from all over are calling one of our Houses their "home-away-from-home" while they are on Oahu getting treatments for a seriously ill or injured child.

As I write this message to you, there are 17 families staying at our Houses and we have placed another seven families with our hotel partner, Outrigger Ohana Hotels. When rooms open up at either the Judd Hillside or Oahu Avenue Ronald McDonald Houses, we will be able to move some of them over.

The mix is fairly typical, with 12 of our current families from the Neighbor Islands and the others from places like Guam, Saipan, Micronesia, California, and North Carolina. Kids in families visiting from the mainland sometimes experience medical emergencies while they are here, and a family's vacation can become an extended stay, turning their lives upside down.

It's really not unusual to have a house full of guests from various parts of the world. This constant changing mix of families enriches everyone staying here, as well as we who are fortunate enough to be in the position to help.

As you read through this edition of our newsletter I hope you will not only get a sense of the strength and courage of the kids and their families, but also the unique, healing atmosphere that they find at the Ronald McDonald House.

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RMHC-HI Board bids farewell to one member, welcomes another

RMHC-HI Board Member Dr. Daniel Robie will be leaving Kapiolani Medical Center to become Chief of Pediatric Surgery at Wolfson Children's Hospital in Jacksonville, Florida. Dr. Robie has contributed greatly to the evolution of RMHC-HI during his six years as a board member, and has been a strong advocate for the children and families. Often, he has been their surgeon. His presence will be greatly missed.

Sara Isonaga has become the newest member of the RMHC-HI Board of Directors. She is currently the Chief Financial Officer for The Meyers Corporation. Welcome aboard Sara!

AROUND THE HOUSE

By Kanoe Paauhau, Judd Hillside House Manager

I am often asked what it is actually like for the families that stay at the Ronald McDonald House. My favorite way of explaining is to describe daily life here, because much of what we do is to provide a safe place for families so that they can go on with their lives, even as they are struggling with all the things that come along with a child's serious illness or injury.

One of the ways we create a nurturing environment is by planning activities and celebrating holidays as families would do while at home. On Good Friday, kids, parents, grandparents and House staff all colored eggs, and on Easter morning, the children were given baskets for the big Easter Egg Hunt. The activities gave families a sense of normalcy. A fun time was had by all and the families were very appreciative of the activities.

Kierah and Erik colored eggs for the big Easter Egg Hunt.

Another thing that families express so much appreciation for is the volunteers that come to give of their time, energy, talent and aloha.

And you know what? It's never too young to start assisting others, as shown by a group of Punahou first-graders who not long ago visited us and helped to decorate the house for Easter.

Another nearby school that sends up volunteer groups to help the kids and families staying here is Maryknoll. Students from there have volunteered at the House no less than 20 times this school year, and their generous support is so welcomed and appreciated!

Punahou first-graders at the Ronald McDonald House

Maryknoll students helped to process a mail appeal for RMHC-HI

On page six of this newsletter, be sure to read about another special youngster that helped our families.

We try to make life seem as normal as possible for the families at the Ronald McDonald House, because having something reliable to hold on to at a time when so much seems out of their own control can be very, very important.

Hilo Teen continued from page 1

Diana says that having to suddenly spend so much time in Honolulu was hard for them at first because, "we are such a close-knit family." But it was made easier by another mother of a child with cancer named Charlene Mersburgh that she met at the Ronald McDonald House.

"Charlene and her family are also from the Big Island and although she had her own challenges, she took us under her wing and shared things she had been through, so as to make it easier for us," Diana recalls.

When it is Leona's turn at the House, she adds her own style of calmness and caring that comforts and heartens the parents around her.

Now, Jordan's mom and grandma are the ones that have become valuable resources for the other parents, providing them with a sense of serenity and sharing the many lessons learned during Jordan's 26-month battle.

Jordan, Diana and Leona are extending exactly the same type of encouragement and guidance that they received from the more experienced parents staying at the House when they first arrived. This ongoing "passing of the knowledge" from one family to others is one of the extraordinary things about the Ronald McDonald House. It is repeated again and again.

On rare occasions, Leona and Diana have a chance to share Jordan for a few hours before one or the other heads back to Hilo.

"We couldn't have made it if we had only hotels to stay in over here," says Leona. "Ronald McDonald House is a special place, like a gift for the children. It is filled with a lot of love. Regardless of what parents have been through at the hospital, at the end of the day when they return "home" there is laughter, and friendships are made that will last a lifetime, clear across the ocean."

VOLUNTEER SPOTLIGHT

by Michael Ahakuelo, Volunteer Coordinator

"Team Kelsey"

It is fitting that we recently observed Mother's Day, because in this issue we are shining the Volunteer Spotlight on six incredibly talented mothers: Sherri Cohen, Sandra Edwards, Tess Green, Traci Nobrega, Tari Perry, and Patricia Sampson-all friends who live in Hawaii Kai. The group, which calls itself Team Kelsey, began volunteering at the Ronald McDonald House in 2007. They are dedicating their service in memory of a young girl named Kelsey Wise, whose struggles began when she was born more than two months prematurely, and continued until she passed away at age 15, on July 26, 2007. What Team Kelsey does for families here at the Ronald McDonald House is from their heart and soul.

Kelsey Wise shortly before her passing

Since beginning their work at the Ronald McDonald House, these extraordinary volunteers have been a blessing, and their contributions now include house cleaning; sponsoring lunches and dinners; baking a variety of goods; quilt making; arts and crafts; working at the Ronald McDonald House Family Room; and dedicating their time and energy to the annual RMHC - HI Golf Classic.

"Team Kelsey is not just a name," says Tari. "We preserve the memory of Kelsey by performing the things that she loved in life. I feel that everything we do is the work of Kelsey. She loved seeing these beautiful quilts and colors and I know she will have a quilt waiting for me when I arrive in Heaven to be with her some day. She liked baking and celebrating the different holidays."

During Kelsey's illness, Tari, who is Kelsey's aunt, stayed at four Ronald McDonald Houses: San Diego, Orange County, Los Angeles, and Minneapolis. "The Ronald McDonald Houses were so beautiful. We felt so much at home and everything was well supplied," she says. "My sister, her husband, and I would sleep on a rotating basis. I slept in a chair next to Kelsey while my sister slept at the Ronald McDonald House. There was always someone with Kelsey by her side."

Team Kelsey at the Ronald McDonald House-(Back row, left to right) Tess Green and Tari Perry. (Front, Left to Right) Traci Norbrega, Sandra Edwards, Patricia Sampson and Sherri Cohen

Obviously, Tari has a unique perspective, having experienced much of what current families staying at the House have. She says she will never forget how much it helped to have a home-away-from-home during her time of need. "It's not always easy what we do, nor to see all these beautiful children going through so much, but in the end, it is so worth it!"

THE 2008 VOLUNTEER APPRECIATION LUNCHEON - MAY 28, 2008

Past and present Guest Families attended the luncheon to personally extend their gratitude to RMHC-HI volunteers for all that they do. Above left, Kaniala Masoe traveled from Hilo to share his family's story and sing original songs accompanied by his ukulele. His a cappella performance of a song written for the Ronald McDonald House clearly moved everyone in the audience. Above right, RMHC-HI's Candace Asam-Lopez poses with two of the other House guests attending the event, Guam's Tina Santos and Fiji's Joanna Tokona.

RMHC-HI's Jerri Chong (top, left) and Michael Ahakuelo (top, right) join the many volunteers in attendance at the 2008 Volunteer Appreciation Luncheon held at the Willows Restaurant.

A COMMUNITY COMES TOGETHER FOR JACQULINE

It was November 2006 when then five-year-old Jacquline Wenzler-Steves first complained of a pain in her hip after a playmate accidentally fell on her. Although Jacquline's hip began swelling and she developed a fever, doctors weren't able to pinpoint the problem until the following April 16th – the day after Jacquline's sixth birthday – when she was diagnosed with Ewing's Sarcoma, a rare form of bone cancer. It was in her pelvis area and tests soon confirmed that it had spread to her lungs. Since then, Dad Vince, a Maui firefighter, mom Annette, and nine-year-old sister Dominique have been dealing with an entirely new reality.

Little Jacquline has completed her treatments, which included more than a dozen rounds of chemotherapy and seven surgeries, including a September operation in Seattle to replace one half of her pelvis and an 18-hour procedure in August to harvest stem cells from her bloodstream. She is "doing well," according to Vince. "The test results were good and various tubes have been removed. Now all emphasis is on after-care to give her the best possible chance not to relapse."

The Wenzler-Steves family has stayed at the Ronald House several times, as they have returned to Oahu again and again for Jacquline's numerous tests and therapies. Their road has been a bumpy one but we have watched them face each new trial with renewed resolve and hopeful optimism. If it were possible for love and devotion alone to cure cancer, their overwhelming devotion to Jacquline would have already rid her of those intruding tumors.

In practical terms, what Vince and Annette have had to do in support of Jacquline has been nothing short of heroic. "We have been able to manage because of the incredible support we have received from so many people," Vince says. "We can't even begin to express our gratitude to our relatives, friends, co-workers at the Maui Fire Department, doctors and nurses, the staff at Ronald McDonald House, and especially the other parents and kids we have met along the way. Everyone cares so much, it is extremely humbling."

Vince somehow has managed to handle his duties with the Maui Fire Department, while also taking turns with Annette to accompany Jacquline to Oahu for her treatments. In fact, Vince was selected as 2008 "Maui Firefighter of the Year." Always humble, Vince downplays his recognition. "I don't think I deserve such an award, as I am fortunate to have such a great job and truly believe that what I do on this earth will somehow make a difference to someone, somewhere," he says.

In an incredible gesture of caring, the Maui Fire Department distributed a letter detailing the Wenzler-Steves' situation and their experiences at the Ronald McDonald House to every firefighter.

A wonderful journal and photo album about Jacquline and her family is available to anyone who is interested at http://www.4jacquline.com/.

The Wenzler-Steves (left to right) Dominique, Vince, Jacquline and Annette

Please clip and mail to RMHC, P.O. Box 61777, Honolulu, Hawaii 96839-1777

I want to step forward for the families. Enclosed is my gift to Ronald McDonald House Charities of Hawaii.

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A different kind of inspiration

By Cathy O. Lee - May 6, 2008

Yesterday was a really rewarding day. My daughter Nicki and I went to the Ronald McDonald House on Judd Hillside to deliver the donations that she collected at a charity concert she threw. Now let me back up:

This all started a few weeks ago when Nicki got a school assignment. Now keep in mind, she's only in the second grade. They're learning about how you can make a difference in your community. The assignment was to do good for your community.

Some of the examples that were given were arranging for trash pickup in your neighborhood, or helping out at a shelter or delivering food to a neighbor in need-different good deeds to get the children to start thinking about others.

The kids finale for the show was "You're the one that I want," from the musical Grease.

I thought this was a wonderful opportunity to sit with Nicki and really encourage her to be creative - and find a way to use her talent to make a difference.

Nicki loves to sing. She's been singing since she was 4 years old. She decided to hold a kids' concert. She told me, 'Mommy, if I can get my friends to perform with me, we can get their parents to donate money!'

Since Nicki is not familiar with the charitable organizations out there, I told her about some, and we decided on Ronald McDonald House Charities of Hawaii. It's a wonderful organization that provides a home-away-from-home for seriously ill children and their families that do not live on Oahu. Their Judd Hillside home can accommodate 10 families whose children are in and out of the hospital on Oahu.

Nicki called her friends and invited them to participate. She got eight children. She asked me if we could have the concert at our house so she wouldn't have to use any money to pay for a place. I offered to donate the food as well.

Above, Nicki Lee posed with RMHC-HI's Director Jerri Chong and House guest Kierah James. The box she's holding contains $1,100 that Nicki raised for Ronald McDonald House.

For two weeks, on Friday nights we had rehearsals. Then we had the Kids' Concert, and it was fabulous! It was adorable - we had kids ranging from almost-two-year-old twins Alexis and Erica singing their ABCs, and Robert playing a little piano and singing Michael Row Your Boat Ashore, all the way up to Nicki's age (eight years-old).

Nicki emceed the show and introduced each act. During the intermission she said, 'If you have not yet made your donation to the Ronald McDonald House Charity, now's the time to do it!' Bossy, that one!

Then they all came out and did an ensemble song-and-dance routine to You're the One that I Want from the movie Grease. Their efforts raised $1,100.

It was a fun evening but it was for a much bigger cause. That really hit home yesterday when Nicki took the little box of donations and went to the Ronald McDonald House and delivered it to Jerri Chong, who is the executive director of RMHC-HI.

We got to meet two of the families staying in the house. One of them was a little boy named Rico and his dad Gilbert, who are from Guam. Rico had surgery at Shriner's for his club feet. We also met Kaylee, who is three months old and just got out of the hospital. She had been born prematurely and was teeny tiny! So her family has been staying at the Ronald McDonald House since February. They're from Kwajalein: her mom, dad and sister Kierah, who is 4 years-old and healthy. When Kierah saw Nicki she ran up and gave her a hug and was her shadow the whole time. She was so thrilled to have someone to play with, so Nicki saw firsthand the difference she made. Everybody from the PR person to the executive director to the woman who runs the house to the office manager-everybody came out to welcome Nicki and thank her.

She sang them the song she sang at her concert, which was Part of Your World from The Little Mermaid, and a few of the staff members cried. She explained to everyone that she decided to call it the Kids' Concert because it was by kids and for kids.

Nicki performed for staff and families after dropping off her contribution.

Then little Kierah said, 'I want to sing a song too!' and she got up and sang. It was a very special day.

What started out as a school project turned into so much more-a learning experience for everyone, including me. I learned how one little person can make a difference.

Reprinted from Cathy's blog http://rsvpstyle.blogspot.com

Cathy O. Lee

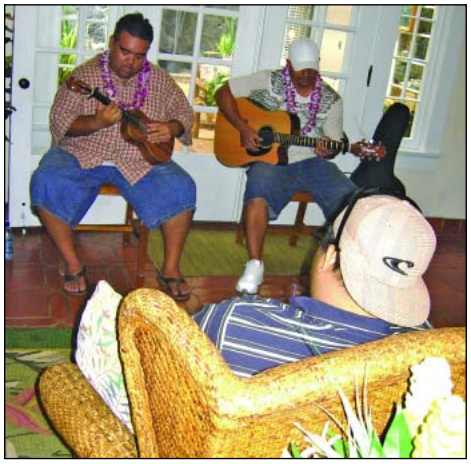
Justin's Wish Comes True

A mother's love is expressed in many ways, and when a child is very sick, the love extends to more than just a smile or saying the words, "I love you" - it sometimes means turning a dream into reality. Recently, RMHC-HI, along with a mom named Tina Rivera, helped to make a wish come true for her son Justin, who is being treated for cancer.

The story begins back in February when 16-year-old Justin, who had been staying at Ronald McDonald House off and on since December 19, 2007, asked his doctor if he could return home to Guam for three weeks, before his next round of chemotherapy started. When the doctor said no because Justin's condition required him to stay closer to the hospital, Justin became very depressed. Tina said he didn't feel much like even leaving his room at the Ronald McDonald House when visitors came to see him. "He was quiet and very sad," she said.

But Tina was determined to cheer him up. She noticed that one thing Justin did enjoy a lot was listening to the Hawaiian band, Beach 5. As a ukulele player, Justin really liked how one of the group members played his ukulele. Tina tried very hard to find out how to contact them and enlisted the RMHC-HI staff to help. It worked. Beach 5 got a message about Justin, took the initiative to call, and happily agreed to visit the House to play music for Justin, Tina and the other families.

On May 9, the families gathered in the living room as Beach 5 set up to play. The secret that had been kept from Justin for weeks was revealed when it was time for Tina to bring Justin out of his room. Tina could barely hold back her tears as she said, "Surprise son! This is one of your wishes coming true."



Suddenly, Justin Rivera had a front row, center seat for his favorite group, Beach 5.

Beach 5 played for over an hour as Justin sat in the front row while the crowd cheered and four-year-old, Kierah, danced happily around the room to the beat of the music. Band member, Christian Yrizarry, was very friendly and thankful for being given the opportunity to help Justin. "The two things I will always give time for - people who are less fortunate than me, and to the kids." Band member and firefighter, Sani Apuakehau, felt humbled by Tina's request to help Justin. "For her to ask for us, it's a no-brainer to do this. This is the reason why I play music, to touch people's lives."

When the mini concert was over, Justin was given a CD and took numerous pictures with the band. Justin's smile was something Tina hasn't seen in awhile. Wiping her tears, Tina said, "I feel thankful he's happy. This is the best Mother's Day I ever had because it brought a smile to my son and made me feel so good that his wish came true."

Tina was so happy that Justin was enjoying himself.

Following the informal concert, Beach 5 (Christian Yrizarry and Sani Apuakehau) hung out with Justin and Tina.

Another happy Mother's Day surprise for moms staying at Ronald McDonald House was a caring gesture by Honolulu's Jonelle Fujita. Fujita, the owner of the clothing company Cinnamon Girl made sure each mother received an Inspirational Kitchen Towel and Potholder set. Above, Leona Toler (left) and Diana Liborio display their gifts. Mahalo Jonelle for bringing joy to the mothers at Ronald McDonald House on Mother's Day!

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A special mahalo to Ryan's Graphics for helping to bring this newsletter to you in color.

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