

The community steps forward for Ronald McDonald House Charities of Hawaii on



Jerri Chong

“Aloha from The House That Love Built”

It's quite natural to experience anxiety and even the feeling of helplessness when the future abruptly becomes uncertain. I think we are all going through some of that because of the recent recession and how suddenly it put in doubt many things that seemed so sure in our lives.

But the truth is that any personal queasiness we may feel gnawing away at us can only give us the vaguest sense of what it's like to be told that your child has a life-threatening illness. “Lost”, “dazed”, “desperate”, “afraid”, “unsure of where to turn” are some of the words I have heard parents use to express how they felt when the doctor had that fateful conversation with them. No one is ever prepared for what they hear. No one ever expects that it could happen to their family.

We understand this at Ronald McDonald House Charities of Hawaii (RMHC-HI). Over the past 22 years, as we provided for the needs of more than 10,000 families from the neighbor islands and other Pacific areas, we have learned much about what is important to them at such a stressful time in their lives.

So many people help us achieve our important mission, and they do it in many different ways. Making a cash donation is the most direct and meaningful way for many people. Others enjoy volunteering, donating profes-

sional services or household items from our Wish List. All these things fit together to ensure that families staying at the Ronald McDonald House have the support they urgently need.

McDonald's Restaurants of Hawaii and all of their owner-operators make it possible for people from every walk of life to be a part of the solution by having donation boxes for customers to drop their change into, and by sponsoring special promotions that generate funds for RMHC-HI through customer participation.

This Friday's McHappy Day is their last big RMHC-HI promotion of the year, and several McDonald's menu items, when purchased, will generate cash donations to our organization. You can also show your support by donating a dollar, signing your name on a paper cut-out hand and posting it at the restaurant.

There are other heroes today too, including the Honolulu Advertiser and the sponsors who, along with McDonald's, have made this special newspaper section possible: Golden State Foods, Meadow Gold Dairies, and Okahara Saimin Factory. They are part of this very special community that cares about making a difference.

Thank you so much to everyone for helping!

Jerri Chong



With Chance finally out of the incubator, Lara was able to hold him in her arms.

When at the hospital, Darrett made regular visits to the Ronald McDonald House Family Room. “It’s a quick escape from the intensity of the NICU,” he says. “As good as the bedside manner of the doctors and nurses is, there is a balance going on between life and death. There are constant struggles going on. The Family Room was a place I could just go, sit down, take a breath and briefly take my mind off of everything that is going on just a short distance away. I made great use of the Family Room. Lara called me her “Rock,” I guess because I seemed unflappable. But the only reason I could be that way, was because I could get this occasional escape, regain my bearings, and when I went back to the NICU for round two that day, I could be who I need to be in there.”



Shown here during an October visit back to the Ronald McDonald House are Darrett, Lara and Chance.

Given a Chance

An eight-year friendship between two employees at the Four Seasons Hotel on Maui turned into love, and the “thirty-something” couple began to plot the course their lives would take together. Little did they know that bringing a baby into the world would bring with it, such serious challenges.

After finding out that their baby was going to be a boy, Lara Bellini and Darrett Schoepner started thinking about what to name him. Although Lara wanted to name the baby Darrett, dad wasn't too excited about that. “I love my name now but I hated it when I was growing up,” he admits. “I wouldn't want to make him go through all the confusion.” But all of their plans, including naming the baby, were suddenly put on hold when they found

out there were serious problems with the pregnancy about six months in. Lara was flown to Kapiolani Medical Center for Women and Children in Honolulu, where doctors put her on strict bed rest, trying to delay what appeared to be an imminent premature birth.

“The doctors at the hospital are very caring, but they don't sugar-coat anything,” Darrett said. “From the very beginning, they objectively discussed with us the chances of our baby living or dying. They told us that since Lara was in her 24th week, his chances were 50-50, and that each day he stayed in mom's womb, his chance of survival would increase significantly. Every day seemed to revolve around his ‘chance’ of making it. The right name for him just came to us.”

So it was then, that Chance Keali'i Salvatore Schoepner was born on April 21, 2009. Lara had managed to make it to her 25th week of pregnancy, but Chance weighed just one pound, nine ounces.

The Wailuku couple spent countless hours each day by their baby's side as he fought for his life in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU). Slowly, Chance grew stronger and his organs began functioning. With each benchmark that he met, he was closer to going home. But as premies slowly develop, parents quickly learn to temper their high hopes with realistic expectations because often, progress is followed by setbacks, and the emotional roller-coaster could be too much.

It happened to them. Chance had been doing so well that it began to look like he could be able to go home even before his original due date of August 3. But he had a bad reaction after a vaccination, even requiring resuscitation at one point. Lara and Darrett felt like they were “starting all over again.” But the couple was determined to do what ever it took to see this through, and Chance seemed to have that fighting spirit too. “All the nurses down at the NICU said he was ‘feisty,’” Lara proudly recalled.

Chance quickly got back on track and was released a day or two before his due date. He continues to thrive back on Maui. Day trips back to Honolulu for follow-up testing show remarkable progress. It was on one of those recent trips back that the trio took some time to return to the Ronald McDonald House, just to say “Hi” and share Chance's progress with everyone.

As fawning staff members cuddled Chance, mom and dad reflected back on their time staying at the House. “We were fortunate to be here, just three minutes away from the hospital,” Darrett said. “We didn't have to worry about where we were putting our heads down every night, where we were getting our meals, or where we're going to shower. We were able to just focus on being there for Chance without having to worry about anything else. We can't say enough about you guys here at the Ronald McDonald House who have made it as easy as possible for us to get through this.”

“And we really learned a lot,” recalled Lara. “It was very interesting meeting people from Guam and

other islands. For me personally, it was nice talking with other people who were going through the same type of things we are. It was just comforting.”

Darrett agreed. “Regardless of what walk of life we all come from, we are all parents with children who need medical assistance, and we all have that in common,” he said. “We have the same stresses, the same worries. We all sit down over dinner and share our experiences with others that we probably never would have met if not for the circumstances. It's inspiring when others tell of their successes on a certain day.”

“And when you think you've had a bad day,” Lara added, “talking with everyone else here helped to put it in perspective.”



Chance had an uphill battle after being born weighing just one pound, nine ounces.



“It's my turn to help”



Back in Hawaii, and with Alyssa back in school, Alberto and she have reason to look to the future optimistically.

Alberto Masaquel, one of our newest volunteers at the Ronald McDonald House Family Room, truly understands what the families he meets there are feeling. “I became a volunteer because I can relate to the families who are going through a rough time in their life. I know what they are experiencing,” says Alberto.

The Family Room, at Kapiolani Medical Center for Women and Children, provides a caring, supportive environment where parents and families of seriously ill children can take

respite from patient care while still being near the child if needed. It is staffed by volunteers like Alberto.

Alberto's experience with such things began suddenly on April 25, 2008, when his 12-year-old daughter Alyssa, an Iolani student at the time, was diagnosed with Acute Myeloid Leukemia (AML), a type of cancer that is found in the blood cells. For Alberto and his family, life was turned upside down.



Here is Alberto on duty at the RMH Family Room.

Current tests can detect no cancer cells in Alyssa at this time, but dad's cautious. “We look forward to two years from now when we can say she is officially in remission,” he says.

Alberto, who is an employee at United Airlines, cites the Family Room as a major positive impact on him and his family. “Although everything was still so fresh for us, the Family Room volunteers took the time to help, and that's what I am here to do now. Volunteering also keeps me grounded and my daughter loves that I am doing this. It's my turn to help those who are dealing with what we had to.”

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Mahalo to the Ronald McDonald House Charities of Hawaii volunteers

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Best Wishes to the Ronald McDonald House and McDonald's of Hawaii on McHappy Day!

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