Jett’s Journey

When Suzi Leahy was 23-weeks pregnant with Jett, her youngest of four children, she learned he had a complete unbalanced atrioventricular septal defect, a congenital heart disease. At the time, her husband AJ was deployed in Iraq. AJ returned home five days later to be with his family.

Together with their children, the Leahy family has stayed at the Ronald McDonald House periodically since September 2018, and full time since November 2018, as Jett awaited a heart transplant.

“Not only has the House made it possible to be close to Jett while he is in the hospital, it’s provided a very comfortable, amazing room for me to stay in,” Suzi said. “My kids look forward to coming here because the siblings are never left out.”

The high school sweethearts made their way to Fayetteville, North Carolina for AJ’s work as a Promotable Specialist for the United States Army. Their first stay at the House was four days before Suzi was to be induced to deliver Jett, all during the wake of Hurricane Florence.

“When I first walked in when I was pregnant, I looked around and thought wow,” Suzi said. “This is beautiful. Honestly, it felt like home as soon as I walked in.”

The Leahy family spent the 2018 holiday season at the House, encouraged by all the holiday decorations to lift their spirits when they were far from home. “The House went above and beyond to make this place feel like home, even during the hardest times.”

In March, the Leahy family received the call of a lifetime—Jett would be getting a heart. Following the transplant, Suzi could see an immediate difference in her son.

“He no longer looked blue and ashy pale, he had a beautiful pink color,” she said. “I thought I would never see him look so alive.”

The Leahy family is now enjoying Jett’s recovery and readying their house for his eventual homecoming. “We get snuggles every day,” Suzi said. “I get to hold him every day, I get to change his clothes. These are huge things.”

Without the House, Jett’s hospital stay would have been a larger financial and emotional burden for the Leahy family. “There is no way I could stay in Chapel Hill—I couldn’t afford it,” Suzi said. “I would be sleeping in a chair for months and showering in the NICU.” Additionally, older siblings Maci and Nate have enrolled in Chapel Hill schools so that the entire family can be together every day.

Suzi said the biggest thing the Ronald McDonald House of Chapel Hill has done for her family is simply being here. “When I am having a hard day at the hospital, my first thought is to come through the front door so I can share about my day with staff or volunteers,” Suzi said.

“That is how I continue to move forward, by talking. No matter how busy, you always take the time to stop and ask how I am doing and how the kids are. The Ronald McDonald House has become my family.”
Dear Friends of the House,

Summer has arrived and the House is busy and bustling. I am happy to share with you that the House you so faithfully support is serving more families than ever before. The rooms you built and sustain are a “home-away-from-home” to more and more families from across North Carolina and beyond. In 2018, the House provided 11,794 nights of lodging, and our Family Room at UNC Children’s Hospital received 8,244 visits—approximately 1,000 more than in 2017!

As we enter the hot months of summer, we ask that you remember the families that will be staying here with us during their summer vacation. There are so many ways to get involved in the House and support families experiencing one of life’s greatest challenges.

From participating in an upcoming event, to becoming a Hero For Hope monthly donor, or dropping wish list items off at our door, we are thankful for every moment you spend thinking about the House and the families who find respite here.

Please schedule a time to stop by and see the amazing things YOUR House is doing.

Warmly,

Liz Snyder, Executive Director

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**Keys For Hope**

**Grand Prize:** 2019 Honda Accord LX

**Tickets:** $100 each

**Drawing:** Nov. 15, 2019

**Only 2,500 chances will be sold!**

Text “keysforhope” to 243725 for tickets, or visit bidpal.net/keysforhope

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**Volunteer Spotlight—Judy Farley**

Judy Farley has a strong passion for volunteering and helping others. After retiring from 21 years of teaching in the UNC Hospital School in June 2011, she became a founding volunteer of the Ronald McDonald Family Room. In the eight years since the Family Room opened, Judy has served over 1,200 hours.

In the Family Room, Judy works to provide a comfortable space for families of all inpatient children to enjoy. Located on the 7th floor of UNC Children’s, the Family Room offers a fully-stocked eat-in kitchen, a comfortable seating area, and a quiet space to relax. Each week, Judy serves one of the three hot meals provided there.

Judy’s favorite part of volunteering with the Family Room is interacting with parents and family members because everyone has a story to tell. “One special memory is of a young mother who shared with me that her child had just had a successful heart transplant. Her happiness and hug will remain with me forever!”

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**Family Support Spotlight—Therapy Dogs**

Every Tuesday around 6:30 in the evening, you can count on two smiling faces to enter the Ronald McDonald House. One of those faces belongs to Susan and the other furry face belongs to Stuart, the therapy dog, one of the sweetest English Goldendoodles around.

What started as a way for Susan to fill her empty nest has turned into a weekly volunteer gig for the pair. “I enjoy spending time with everyone and hearing their stories, usually about their pets,” Susan said. “This is when I know that we are making a small difference for a few minutes to comfort them when they are missing a pet they had to leave at home.”

Therapy dogs are a regular staple of the Family Support Program at the House, which offers a variety of activities for guests of all ages. Activities range from yoga, to art, bingo, or even on-site haircuts. Every activity is designed to facilitate the community of support families form while staying at the Ronald McDonald House.

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**A Lasting Legacy**

In February 2019, the House unveiled a brand new Legacy Tree. The Legacy Tree is dedicated in memory of Maxine Hepler Fodor, who lived a life committed to the health and well-being of all people through her work as an Emergency Room Registered Nurse. Max was a brave breast cancer survivor, passionate sports fan, and devoted and loved wife, mother, grandmother, great-grandmother and friend who could smile and laugh easily with her quick wit and great sense of humor.

Over the years, leaves, acorns, butterflies, squirrels and other woodland creatures will bring the Legacy Tree to life as more friends of the House choose to honor their loved ones through this display. The tree was generously designed and painted by local artist, Cassie Handzo.

Centrally located in the House’s main staircase, the Legacy Tree is a focal point, bringing beauty and whimsy to the House, while honoring the individuals who have made a commitment to the long-term legacy of the Ronald McDonald House.

For more information about the Legacy Tree, contact Elizabeth Hullender, Director of Philanthropy at elizabeth@rmhch.org or 919-913-2045.

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**WISHLIST**

- Individually wrapped snacks (crackers, cookies, granola bars, etc.)
- Paper products (disposable plates, tissues, paper towels, toilet paper, etc.)
- Household Cleaners (windex, toilet bowl cleaner, clorox wipes, lysol, etc.)
- Individual meals (mac & cheese, soup, tuna/chicken salad)
- Donations to the Ronald McDonald House (toothbrushes, toothpaste, etc.)
- Donations to Make-A-Wish Foundation

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**CROWN HOUSE OF CHARITY**

**Eliza Farley, Volunteer**

Volunteering with the Family Room is interacting with parents and family members because everyone has a story to tell. “One special memory is of a young mother who shared with me that her child had just had a successful heart transplant. Her happiness and hug will remain with me forever!”

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**Letter from the Director**

Debbie Johnson, Executive Director
“When I first walked in when I was pregnant, I looked around and thought wow, this is beautiful. Honestly, it felt like home as soon as I walked in.” - Suzi Leahy

Make a monthly commitment to supporting families from across North Carolina and beyond, as they face one of life’s greatest challenges. Become a Hero for Hope and join our community of support for more than 1,600 families each year as they conquer childhood illness and injury.

Monthly gifts of the following amounts will...

$100 — Stock the Ronald McDonald Family Room at North Carolina Children’s Hospital

$85 — Completely cover the cost of a one-night stay at the House

$45 — Cover the room fee of an apartment for one night

$35 — Stock the pantry at the House

$25 — Cover the room fee of a standard room for one night

$10 — Provide laundry supplies for families

Visit rmhch.org/heroforhope for more info