

ANDREA LYPKA

224 Sun Vista Court South
Treasure Island, FL 33706
(727) 631-4714
alyпка@mail.usf.edu

New Ronald McDonald House set to open

ANDREA LYPKA / MyFoxTampaBay.com

A fourth Ronald McDonald House in the Bay Area will open at the end of December in St. Petersburg.

Unlike the other two existing houses in St. Petersburg, the Central house will be inside the new [All Children's Hospital](#) Outpatient Care Center offering 14 bedrooms for those families who cannot leave the hospital because their children are so sick.

"Those families would never leave the hospital because their kids are in critical condition. This allows the parents to get the sleep they need without leaving the hospital and care for their child," Janice Davis, Executive Director, and CEO of [Ronald McDonald House Charities of Tampa Bay](#) said.

Children fighting for their lives

The house will serve children like 9-year-old Jacob Mitchell and his family. Jacob is fighting for his life -- when he was six weeks old, he was diagnosed with congenital heart disease requiring a heart transplant, says his mother, Nicole Mitchell.

He is recovering from a second major surgery for a very rare condition, an aortic aneurysm, and if all goes well, he will go home Friday.

"Jacob is the star, I just do my job," said Dr. James Quintessenza, a cardiothoracic surgeon who is known as Dr. Q to his patients.

It is the latest step in what has been a long journey for the family that began in March of 2000. Six weeks after Jacob was born, he was flown from Fort Lauderdale's Joe DiMaggio Children's Hospital into All Children's Hospital, where he stayed for almost four months.

His mother stayed at St. Pete East Ronald McDonald House within walking distance from the hospital. She says the House is a lifeline for families whose child is being treated at one of the Bay area hospitals.

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"They basically took us under their wing," Nicole Mitchell said. "They are home-away-from home, they become your family and support system. They genuinely care. I can't imagine there are so many people who get turned away."

Nicole Mitchell says Jacob's condition united the family even more, and brought them more friends and a second family, too. Friends and family are watching their two daughters back home in Ft. Lauderdale: 8-year-old Arianna and 4-year-old Hailey while the mother is away.

With a four-year gap, the Mitchells are coming back to All Children's a couple times a year for checkups and tests for their son. During this time, they have gotten to know all the doctors and nurses at the hospital and the volunteers and staff at the Ronald McDonald House.

"It ended up being such a blessing to all of us during such a bad time. When I send photos to my mother-in-law, I always send them to the House, too," said Nicole Mitchell.

She has been living at the Ronald McDonald House for the past three weeks to be at her son's bedside. Even though staying at the hospital is mentally and physically straining, she only goes to the house to sleep.

Despite the hardships, Nicole says she has learned to stay positive, and to comfort other parents in the house.

"I believe love helps someone heal faster," she said.

A fourth Ronald McDonald House opens in Tampa Bay

The new Ronald McDonald house in All Children's Hospital will be the third in St. Petersburg, and the fourth one in the Tampa Bay area.

The addition of the third facility in St. Petersburg's All Children's Hospital makes this organization one of the largest Ronald McDonald Houses in the country serving one hospital, Janice Davis said.

The cost of the new facility is \$1 million. They started raising money for the project two years ago and have raised about \$900,000, Davis said.

"We want to open the doors in December without financial burden," Davis said. "We are optimistic that we will be able to retire that debt before the opening. But it is going to take the community rallying around the project. Anybody who visits a Ronald McDonald House understands the impact it has on pediatric families. When a family is faced with such a difficulty, with life threatening conditions, we want to provide them with emotional stability and a safe place to stay."

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Altogether, there will be 66 bedrooms for parents who can't leave their child's bedside in St. Petersburg.

"But this is never enough. All the statistics show pediatrics and specialty care is growing," Davis said.

The new facility was sponsored by businesses and community fundraisers. The third house in St. Petersburg is more than needed because the demand for rooms is rising, said Alison Barrick, spokesperson at the Ronald McDonald House Charities of Tampa Bay.

"Even with the two houses in St. Petersburg, we had to turn away about 300 families last year," Barrick said.

Donna Young is the House Director and COO for Ronald McDonald House. She has been with the organization for 30 years. She is a registered nurse and used to work in pediatrics. She says this year in June, 66 families did not get a room.

"In June 2008, we turned away no families, but in June 2007 we turned away 62; of these 17 went to a hotel," she said.

These families can buddy up with other families at

Ronald McDonald House or get a hotel room at a discount rate. But she says this may be out of reach for some.

"For most of the families it is a hardship and they can't afford it," Young said.

The recent increase in pediatrics outpatient programs has increased the need for housing of families with children needing medical care, and it has lengthened the stay of these families, she said.

"Our average stay lengthened from four and a half days to almost seven days over the past several years," Young said. "The acuity level of sick children has increased, with more children in the intensive care units, where parents cannot sleep. All Children's Hospital's Transplant program has grown as well. The Neonatal Intensive Care Unit is always full to capacity," she said.

Volunteers needed for the Central Ronald McDonald House

Some of the parents end up volunteering and later working for Ronald McDonald House.

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Betsy Wilkinson, House Manager at the Tampa Ronald McDonald House, started out as a mother staying at the house. In 1994, her son, Patrick was diagnosed with neuroblastoma, a childhood cancer. When her son was treated at All Children's, the Wilkinsons stayed at the Ronald McDonald House. Her son passed away in 1995 when he was 8 years old.

"The house had such a huge impact on us in a positive way that eventually I wanted to volunteer," she said.

Eventually she became an employee there and has found her niche in life.

She says recently more parents seek the services of All Children's Hospital because that type of care is not offered where they live.

"Since All Children's increased the number of the beds in the new hospital, this means more families will be coming from out of town," Wilkinson said.

She says volunteers are vital part of the Ronald McDonald House.

"They are a warm hug for the parents who come to the house," Wilkinson said. "With the new house, we need a new set of volunteers. To qualify to be a volunteer, you need to be 18 years old or older, have a listening ear and a caring heart."

To volunteer with the Ronald McDonald House Charities of Tampa Bay, click on over to www.rmhctampabay.com.