

# San Antonio

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The house that  
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GUNN, LEFT & JACKSON  
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SAN ANTONIO, TX 78205

# The house that San Antonio built

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A young man dying of cancer saw a desperate need and planted the seed of an idea. He never lived to see it come to fruition, but a caring community made sure that it blossomed.



Mike Malone



From left: Randy Brown, Ted Lee and Dr. Howard Britton in front of an almost-completed Ronald McDonald House.

### By Nan Cuba

**M**ike Malone flourished during his junior year in '75 at Roosevelt High School, but was forced to start his senior year in Germany where his dad, an Air Force physician, had been transferred. A physical exam to complete Mike's application to the Air Force Academy worried a radiologist. Exploratory surgery. Shattered dreams. The diagnosis: Hodgkins Disease.

Mike and his mother, Bess, endured three air evac trips from Germany to San Antonio's Brooke Army Medical Center—Mike lying on a litter in the front of the plane, Bess sitting in the back with her

box lunch and no appetite. There was no space for the personal items that would have helped ease the anguish.

In between the treatments, Mike refused to stay in the hospital. Military housing was poor, and even that was limited, and most apartment owners demanded six-month-to-a-year leases. But Bess persisted, did whatever she had to, always finding them some small, barren but private place to live. Mike's older sister took a year off from college to keep them company, especially during the long depressing waits in the hospital. Here Mike and his sister heard horror stories from families with sick children and no car, no money and no place to stay. Counselors told them that total family destruc-

tion among those with a seriously ill member occur at a rate of 80 percent within five years of the diagnosis. Mike counted his family lucky by comparison, and began asking what was later to become an obsession for him and a dream-come-true for San Antonio: "Couldn't we do something for these people—find a big house and help care for them?"

During their final dreary trip from Germany, Bess read a small article in *Redbook* which described the first Ronald McDonald House. It told how Fred Hill, tight end for the Philadelphia Eagles, approached his teammates and employers and asked for support in raising funds to fight the lymphatic leukemia which had overtaken his daughter. Their enthusiastic



response helped build a new hospital wing and, with the cooperation of the local McDonald's franchise owners, the eventual purchase of an old four-story house which, when renovated, provided an inexpensive, comforting haven for out-of-town families with very sick children. The house was named after the hamburger chain's clown mascot, conjuring up visions of fun and an atmosphere of hope for the tenants. Bess showed the article to Mike. His response was, "Let's do it."

Painfully, Mike spent many of his days driving around the Ft. Sam area looking for a possible temporary home for the desperate families of ill children in San Antonio. Although he did not live to see the house, Mike's legacy was a determination to see his dream realized.

Two years of grief and introspection passed after Mike's death, with Bess still undecided about beginning the project. Persuasion came in the form of a poem written on a homemade card with a check from Mike's sister, a second check from Mike's good friend and pallbearer, and a call from a family counselor asking, "I heard you were trying to do something about a home for cancer patients. When can we get together?"

In 1983, over 100 out-of-town families brought their children to Santa Rosa Children's Hospital for treatment of leukemia and other cancers; many more came for treatment of other serious illnesses. Multiply that by the number of local medical centers, including the military ones, and it becomes obvious that the need for such a place as the Ronald McDonald House has long existed in San Antonio. So in May, 1980, Bess, the counselor, and a few others met with the parents' group at the Children's Hospital and formed a steering committee. At the time there were only three Ronald McDonald Houses in existence. (By the end of this year, the 10th anniversary of that first Philadelphia house, an estimated 75 houses will be open in the U.S., Canada, Australia and Holland—providing solace and a place to stay for more than 200,000 family members annually.)

San Antonio's McDonald's Restaurant owners were interested in the project, but were not financially ready to make a commitment of support. They required a non-profit organization first be formed to supervise the building of the house and insure its maintenance upon completion. The organization was to contain a combination of committed parents, relatives and friends of seriously ill children; professionals in the health-care field; and community leaders. Thus COSSAT (Children's



From left: Dr. Howard Britton, Margaret Liljenwall of COSSATT and Mr. Ted Lee.

*Families will be able to meet with others and give support to those facing the same problems.*

Oncology Services<sup>®</sup> of San Antonio, Texas, Inc.) was born, with Dr. Howard A. Britton, medical director of the Santa Rosa Children's Hospital, its first president.

Britton says of the house, "Not only will parents and families of children with illnesses be more comfortable, but they will be able to meet with others who are facing the same problems. We know that parents can offer each other a great deal of emotional support during times of crisis. The Ronald McDonald House will be a valuable, sharing experience for families and the medical community."

The importance of a place for communal support was one that Ted Lee, patent attorney and vice president of COSSAT, could understand. At three o'clock in the

morning on July 8, 1976, his three-year-old daughter, Jenna, died of cancer. On his way out of the hospital, as Lee stepped over and around other parents lying on mattresses and pillows in the corridor, a voice whispered, "God bless you, young man." Lee wishes that suffering stranger could know what comfort that simple statement gave.

Most of the people involved in COSSAT have been medical professionals or parents like Bess Malone and Ted Lee. They have had a vision and a purpose—and they have been persuasive. They proved their seriousness, and in August 1981, the local McDonald's Restaurant owners decided to make the project a joint effort. The 31 store co-op, including restaurants in Del Rio, Eagle Pass, Uvalde, Seguin, New Braunfels, Kerrville, San Marcos and Laredo, pledged \$150,000 to be provided over a period of five years. Another \$25,000 was donated by the Ray Kroc (founder and senior chairman of the board of McDonald's Corporation) Ronald McDonald Children's Fund. Then the hard work began.

While several COSSAT members concentrated on a site selection, others were soliciting community participation in the form of money, equipment, and effort. Two supportive organizations were formed. Friends of COSSAT consisted of many people who spent countless hours doing the small, important jobs necessary to further the project and raise money.



Sallie Embs (left) and Margaret Liljenwall, COSSAT vice president for public affairs.

They sacrificed their spare time, concentrating their energies on whatever tasks needed to be done—in other words, they were the project's backbone. The purpose of Friends of the Ronald McDonald House was to solicit large sums of money. Each of the 150 members was asked to pay an initial donation, and they sponsored such fund-raising events as a benefit luncheon and fashion show at the St. Anthony Hotel.

As the Ronald McDonald House became more publicized, contributions of every kind began pouring in from throughout San Antonio and the surrounding communities. Literally thousands of people rallied to the cause. Examples of the widespread spirit of enthusiasm and generosity were the Charity Ball Association's sizeable donation of the proceeds from the 1983 Chrysanthemum Ball, the Junior League's \$53,000 contribution and pledge to create a volunteer program to help run the house, the Olmos Kiwanis Club's proceeds from two high school North-South All-Star football games, half of the profits from two Celebrity Waiter's Charity Luncheons (even Mayor Cisneros donned an apron), a check from the fall and spring candy sales by the Junior National Honor Society of Roosevelt High School (money usually spent on their spring picnic), \$25,000 from Laredo with other communities considering similar donations, various foundations and grants, a line of credit at 10 percent interest from three

## Local unions donated their time after work hours, working cheerfully in the summer heat.

local banks, and a possibility that some of the Spurs would become involved in the campaign. The names of contributing individuals, organizations, and businesses became endless—and each was accepted with equal gratitude.

Meanwhile, Sallie Embs, COSSAT executive director, was sent to Chicago for a conference which reported on successful houses and furnished helpful advice. Professional architects and builders took positions on the COSSAT Board, playing major roles in planning the physical structure.

Studies of patient demographics showed that 80 percent of the children treated for serious illness in San Antonio traveled to the Santa Rosa Children's Hos-

pital. With that in mind, in August 1982, a 35,000-square-foot lot on Lewis Street, two blocks east of San Pedro between Cypress and Poplar streets and south of the San Antonio College campus area, was purchased. The price tag was \$105,000. Immediately, architectural firms began submitting possible plans.

The COSSAT Board selected O'Neill & Perez Architects, who had contacted and visited Ronald McDonald houses across the country before creating their design. The 10,200-square-foot, brick veneer, two-story dwelling was to provide private bedrooms for 10 families, common living areas, a meditation room, communal kitchen and laundry facilities, indoor and outdoor play areas, a greenhouse, and an apartment for the resident manager. Plans even allowed for another 10-bedroom addition in the future.

Then in November of 1983, representatives from the Greater San Antonio Builders Association (GSABA) offered their services as general contractor. A subsidiary corporation, Charity Building Corporation, was chartered to build the house on a cost-plus-zero basis. The job was divided into some 20 parts, each with an assigned chairman. GSABA members were approached for donations of equipment and supplies, and everyone responded generously, many even acquiring items from their suppliers. Local labor unions joined the project by donating their time after job hours, cheerfully working even through the blistering San Antonio summer heat. The International Guild of Accredited Interior Designers, a member organization of the GSABA, provided its services in furnishing and decorating the interior.

The end result of these years of hopes, generous donations and hard work should produce by mid-February a Ronald McDonald House worth close to one million dollars that will open completely debt-free—an accomplishment of which everyone involved is very proud.

Once families arrive, a live-in manager will manage the house. The manager will register occupants, assign rooms, explain the facilities available and the rules. Families will take care of their own bedrooms and help keep the common areas in order. The house will not be limited to families with children under care for cancer—the concept involves children with various serious diagnoses.

The house will be available to children and their families receiving treatment from any local hospital. The only requirement is a referral from a social worker, with Dharma Rodriguez, M.S.W., of the Santa Rosa Children's Hospital, acting as liaison. The residents will be asked to pay



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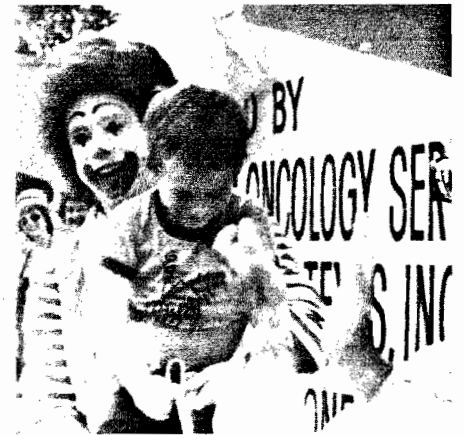
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a minimal amount per night, but if they are unable to pay, the charge will be waived. This money should cover only half of the operating costs, making future contributions imperative. These will be either donations of money, materials such as food and supplies, or services such as the Junior League volunteer program to help entertain the children or the area garden clubs' pledge to help care for the grounds. The idea is to continue the widespread community support because, unfortunately, the need to help sick children will always exist.

Willie Weyel understood that. He was five and a half years old, just entering kindergarten, when his cancer was diagnosed. During the 16 months that followed, Willie's family struggled to deal



Willie Weyel cuts the ribbon.

with the problems of his chronic illness and to prepare for an uncertain future. Willie was grateful for his family and, young as he was, he noticed that some children were not as fortunate as he. He believed that a local McDonald House would make it easier for these families to stay together and simply provide others with a nice place to live for awhile. He knew it was important, and he was proud to sell fund-raising buttons and to ride on the publicity float. He was very pleased when Dr. Britton asked him to cut the ribbon at the site celebration, and he looked forward to visiting the house so he could play with the children and meet their families away from the hospital. When Willie realized that he would not live to see the house finished, he asked that people remember him by giving whatever was needed.

To many hard-working San Antonio volunteers and generous donors, this is not just the Ronald McDonald House. It is Willie's house, and Jenna's house, and Mike's house and . . . because of all these children, this truly is the house that love built.