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The Ronald McDonald House’s Rise

With Many Shamrock Shakes

When one hears the word “nonprofits”, explosive growth doesn’t come to mind. I feel the word “nonprofits” is more commonly associated with quite the opposite, lag and perhaps even stagnation, as a result of nonprofit values: profit is not their primary ambition. Yet, even with my preconceived notions going into September 28th’s interview with Mrs. Alisa Powell, the Director of Cleveland’s Ronald McDonald House Programs and Services, I found myself admittedly and amazingly mistaken. The visit to the Ronald McDonald House of Cleveland illuminated how nonprofits with the will to succeed and proper governance can have incredible expansion regardless of their negative inclination for profit. This paper will first describe the inspiring early history of the Ronald McDonald House and how it cultivated a nationally renowned organization, and then discuss the effectiveness of the organization and its programs.

Identical to any other professional appointment, our visit began with the typical greeting and handshake accompanied by an inviting smile. Mrs. Powell had graciously invited me into her workspace and immediately eased the tension with her retrieval of a water bottle prior to engaging me in the building’s lobby. We conducted an insightful and intellectual interview over the course of an hour pertaining to the organization’s rapid past and modern expansion along with early Ronald McDonald House history.

It is difficult to call my time with Powell a formal interview as the conversation flowed with such ease it would have appeared to a third party viewer that we were lifelong friends. Our conversation began with a simple tale outlining the remarkable inception of the Ronald McDonald House; Fred Hill of the 1965 NFL Philadelphia Eagles first established the organization in response to family tragedy. In 1971, his daughter, Kim Hill, was diagnosed at age four with leukemia to which he responded by retiring from the NFL in full support of his daughter. With the push of Leonard Tose, at the time the owner of the Philadelphia Eagles, and the McDonald’s Corporation, Fred Hill was able to erect the first Ronald McDonald House on October 15, 1974 in Philadelphia. Strangely enough, this house was primarily funded with full assistance of a new McDonald’s promotion, Shamrock Shakes. With every shake purchased, McDonalds dedicated a portion of the income to Fred Hill’s cause, prominently sponsoring the inception of the organization who proudly brandishes the McDonalds name today (A. Powel, personal communication, September 28, 2015).

In regards to her terminal illness, Kim Hill was fortunately able to see the organization built upon her condition develop to 349 Ronald McDonald Houses worldwide and succeed to provide affordable housing to helpless and hapless families as a direct result of her father’s sponsorship. However, even with her successful battle with leukemia, she was sadly taken in 2011 at the end of a 20 year battle with brain tumors. Shortly after her passing, Kim Hill’s parents attended the Ronald McDonald House’s national convention to give presentation regarding their involvement, a truly remarkable feet defining their dedication not only to the organization, but for the love of their daughter and the community trapped in the same situations to which tormented them for years (A. Powel, personal communication, September 28, 2015).

Of these 349 organizational homes, there have been 196 Family Rooms established, of which the Cleveland’s Ronald McDonald House is a rare chapter to support multiple family rooms and the only Ohio chapter to even employ the program. At the Cleveland Clinic, Rainbow Babies & Children’s Hospital, Fairview Hospital, and MetroHealth, the local chapter and the national organization aspire to comfort the families and reduce as much strain as possible (A. Powel, personal communication, September 28, 2015). These rooms offer a variety of services that may vary between family rooms, but often include a kitchen area, shower facilities, sleeping rooms, laundry facilities, internet access, medical reference books, a quiet space, and a television (Ronald McDonald House of Cleveland, n.d.b). In an effort for children to heal and cope better, the Family Room program offers a comfortable living space at the hospital, a place that feels like home while the family can rest only a moment away from their sick child.

As opposed to the aforementioned program, the social mission of the houses themselves are conducted onsite and nearly mirror the business model of a common hotel with exception to the ideals underlying the care of its visiting patrons. The Ronald McDonald House organization upholds its social mission, to provide affordable housing to families with ill children, through flexibility in its payment plan. Instead of a mandatory fee imposed on its guests at a price meant to generate profit, the Ronald McDonald House asks for, but does not require, a sensible donation around the size of $20 each night. Even without donation, guests will enjoy room and board at the expense of the organization in an attempt to ease the financial burden that families with sick children would experience housed in other locations. (A. Powel, personal communication, September 28, 2015).

When the average cost of food and lodging for one families stay is $75 per day, it is amazing the Ronald McDonald House can even continue its service. On an operating budget of less than $3 million, the Ronald McDonald House must cover the costs from their employees, food, advertisement, and more, so it remains a wonder that with a seemingly small budget the organization has experienced and is currently experiencing explosive growth. In its beginning, the organization saw 11 houses open in 5 years. Over the course of a decade, this grew to 100 houses (Ronald McDonald House of Cleveland, n.d.a). On average, of its 41 year history, the organization has erected almost 9 houses every year, an amazing feat in regards to its free-service business model.

However great the total organizational expansion seems, the growth doesn’t stop there. With each home, there comes a time when demand is too great to support all families looking for service. At Cleveland’s Ronald McDonald House, it is not uncommon to have a waiting list of 30 to 40 families at any given moment. With the organizations high demand, not only must they build more homes to satisfy the need, but the organization must also expand upon its existing locations. At Cleveland’s local chapter, a current expansion is underway to add an additional 20,000 square feet of floor space, to which 18 new guest rooms, extended recreation and conference rooms, desktop computers, and a larger kitchen facility will envelope (A. Powel, personal communication, September 28, 2015). How the organization can afford such expansions is bewildering to me, but Powell and I did not extensively cover the local chapter’s earning report.

Even without the extensive knowledge concerning their funding, Cleveland’s Ronald McDonald House seems financially stable and quite effective in its communal role. The deciding reason to finance the current expansion is completely backed by the house’s demand for more rooms. The local chapter plays a great role in society to supply affordable housing to families with sick children, which it does, but even so, the house has had to turn away 749 families this year alone. With regards to this knowledge, one may say the Ronald McDonald House isn’t effectively completing its social mission to every family, but it currently aims to do so. These families were not offered full service out of financial inability to pay, but because the Ronald McDonald House had no room availability to which the organization wholeheartedly hopes to remedy with the current expansion. Even with such a large number of families turned away, Cleveland’s Ronald McDonald House serves an even greater number: 1,594 rooms occupied since the beginning of August which extrapolates to about 10,000 rooms occupied this year (A. Powel, personal communication, September 28, 2015). The programs of the Ronald McDonald house are quite extensive, comforting, and effective. Alisa Powell couldn’t be more correct when she firmly declares, “the organization sees a need, and we do it.”

References

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