

The Family House Story



FAMILY HOUSE

Family House of San Francisco—which provides free, temporary housing for families of seriously ill children, including those battling cancer—got its start in an unusual way.



Sophie



Xenia and Kenia



Musician friend with Joan Finton-Baumrind



Ann, Marisa, and Kirk Shelton

Written by Richard Blodgett

Thank you to all who were interviewed for this project, and to all who have contributed to our incredible history thus far. Dedicated to the many families we have had the honor to serve, and the many more yet to come.



A.J. McMillon's End of
Treatment Party

4/92

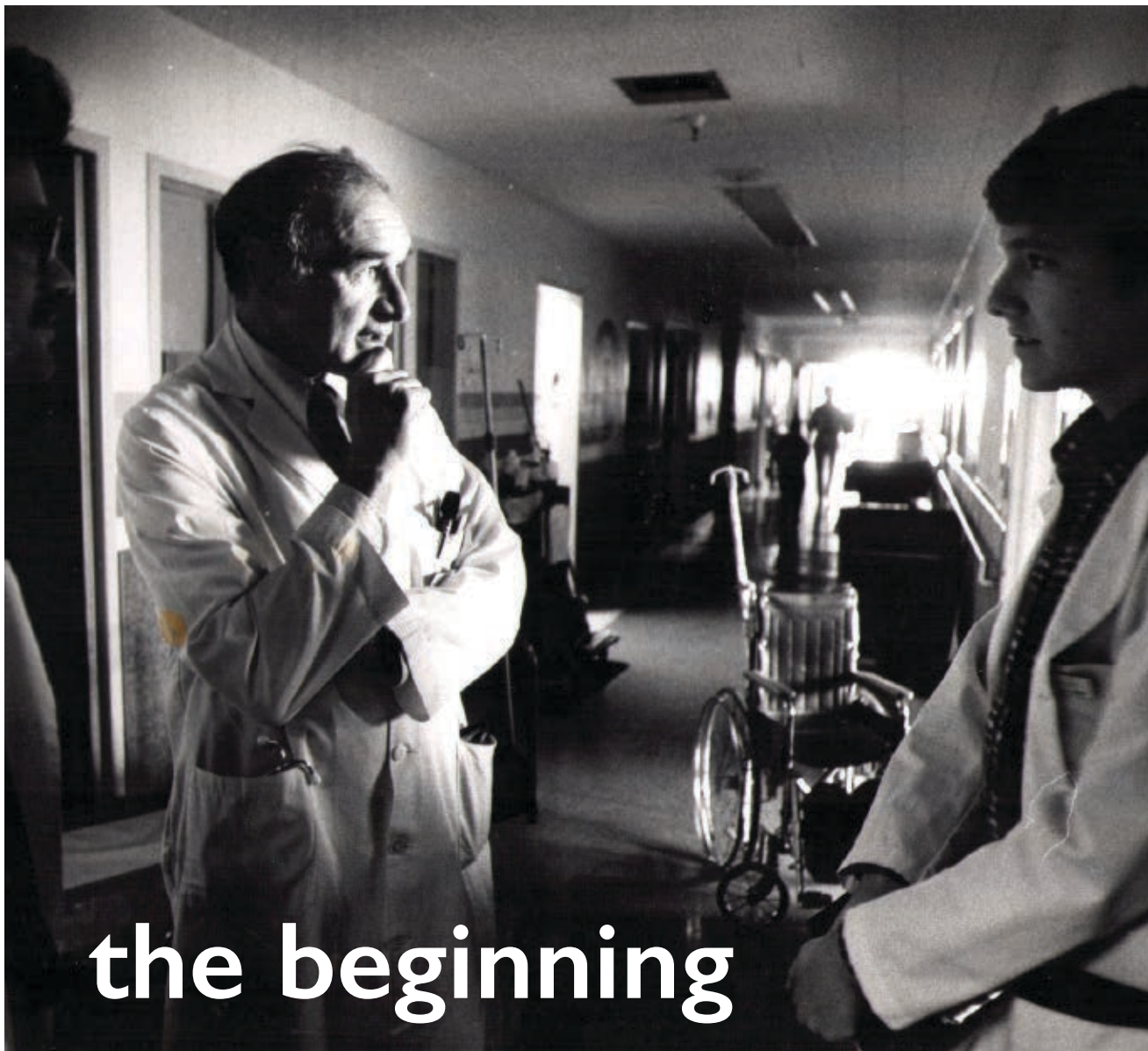


Beverly Flanagan & Stephanie
were here for a visit. Stephanie
is almost 4 & she had a GOOD
check-up! 8.9.88



Debbie Ablin and a friend



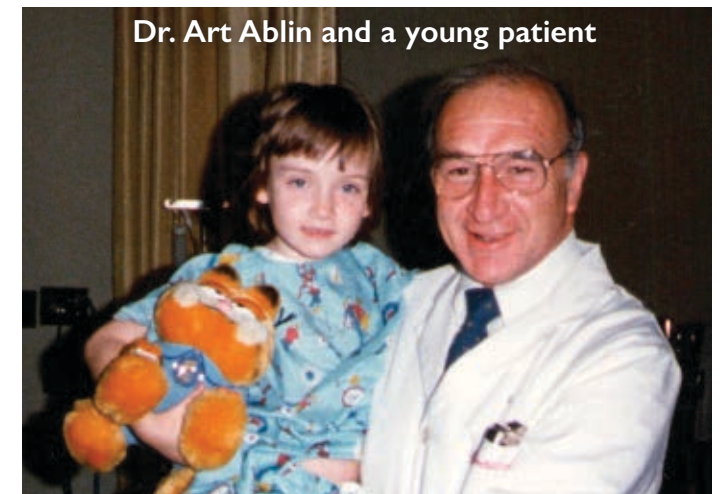


The year was 1980. Dr. Arthur Ablin, Head of Clinical Pediatric Oncology at the University of California San Francisco (UCSF), was deeply concerned about the hardships faced by the families of children being treated for cancer.

Childhood cancer is relatively rare; about 16,000 cases are diagnosed in the United States each year. But when it does strike, it turns a family's life upside down. The diagnosis of cancer in a child is incredibly distressing for everyone in the family. It creates an instant need to do everything possible to help the child.

Childhood cancers are treated mainly at large medical centers such as the UCSF Benioff Children's Hospital. As a result, Ablin says, "Parents must often travel long distances with their very sick children to receive care."

Before Family House was founded, many parents struggled to find temporary housing in San Francisco while their children were being treated at the UCSF hospital. For many, staying at a hotel or motel for the days, weeks or even months their child was hospitalized was well beyond their financial means.





how family house started

Ablin and his wife, Debbie, recruited a small group of friends, colleagues, and oncology parents to help turn his idea of creating a pediatric guest house into reality.

Barry Grove was a San Francisco attorney who had lost a child to cancer. “There were some really wonderful people involved with the creation of Family House,” Grove says. “Most of us had had a child with cancer. All of us were fighting back against the disease. It really felt good to be doing something.”

Dan and Kathleen Toney had lost their five-month-old son, James Donovan Toney, to a brain tumor. They subsequently had three more children, but the experience of losing young James Donovan stuck with them and they were eager to help other parents of children with cancer.

Other members of the founding group included Ann and John Leonardo, David Joy, and Dr. Joseph Kushner, a colleague of Ablin’s at the UCSF hospital. Ann Leonardo says she and her husband were “horrified” that many oncology parents were forced by financial circumstances to sleep in their cars or in chairs in the hospital waiting room. She says she and her husband talked with Ablin and offered to help in any way they could, having lost their young son, John.

The new organization addressed an important issue: how to overcome the isolation that many oncology parents feel when they are suddenly in a strange city, far from home, with no one to lean on for emotional support. “We quickly realized that the families staying at Family House were very supportive of each other,” Ablin says. “And that became the real service we offered—the ability of families to talk with other families who were empathetic and had similar concerns and needs.”



Ann and John Leonardo

the building on irving street

The group began by meeting with officials of Ronald McDonald House to see whether that organization might be willing to open a facility near the UCSF hospital. The Ronald McDonald House Charities organization was relatively new. It had opened its first location in Philadelphia in 1974 and had expanded to California in 1979 by establishing a branch near the Stanford Children's Hospital in Palo Alto. But the fledgling organization wasn't ready to take on the cost of operating a facility in San Francisco.

"So we decided to do it ourselves," Ann Leonardo says. "That's how Family House got formed."

The first priority was to find a suitable building near the hospital. The group was blessed with an incredible stroke of good luck. The Mormons (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints) owned a building at 50 Irving Street close to the UCSF hospital. The building was being used to house Mormon missionaries, but Ablin learned from a friend that the church no longer needed it for that purpose and might be willing to sell. So he phoned the Mormon headquarters in Salt Lake City and asked about buying the property. "When they heard what we wanted to do with it," he says, "they were very sympathetic."

The Mormons agreed to keep the property off the market while Ablin's group tried to raise money to purchase and operate it. Moreover, they offered unusually generous financial terms: after the two sides arrived at a price of \$500,000, the church agreed to accept a mere \$1,000 down payment and grant a \$499,000 mortgage for the balance. Grove says, "It was very much a philanthropic effort by the Mormons." The building opened in 1981 to 9 families.

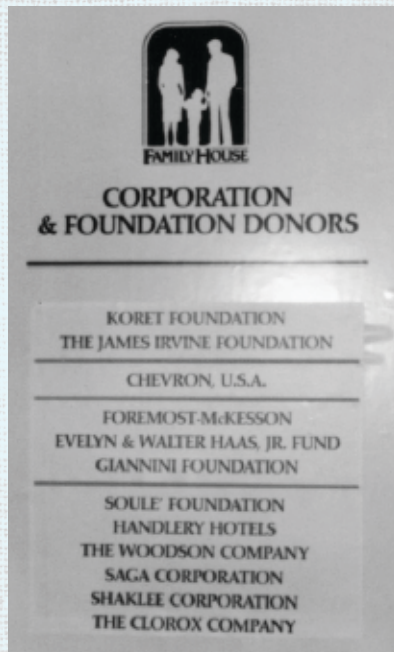


enter the koret foundation

The group also set about raising money. “We were immediately successful in getting a bunch of small donations, but nothing like what we were looking for,” Grove says.

Again, the group had an incredible stroke of good luck. The Koret Foundation was newly established in San Francisco and was looking for worthy causes to which to donate funds. Its founders, Joseph and Stephanie Koret, had made their fortune in sportswear manufacturing and were motivated by a strong desire to help others.

Ablin and his group approached the foundation about making a grant to Family House. “We established a relationship with the Koret Foundation, and they were compassionate and early-on gave us significant amounts of money,” Ablin says. In fact, two of the foundation’s earliest grants went to Family House: one for \$100,000, and a separate \$150,000 challenge grant to help retire the mortgage on the Irving Street building. Foremost McKesson Foundation also pitched in with an important contribution, and Family House was able to pay off the \$499,000 mortgage in just 17 months. The building on Irving Street was renamed Koret Family House in recognition of that organization’s support.



Family House continues to rely today entirely on contributions from individuals, foundations, and corporations, including those taking part in its fundraising events such as the annual Cabernet for Connoisseurs dinner and wine auction. More than 50 leading California vintners have rallied to the cause of Family House, and have expressed their support for the children and families who stay there, by contributing wines to the auction each year. Family House receives no financial aid from the UCSF hospital or any other public or government agency.



Joseph and Susan Koret



Santa visits
Family House
with Fire Dept. & Police Dept. 12.4.90

“a shoestring operation”

All the early work of organizing and managing Family House was done by volunteers. The new organization did not have any paid staff in its first few years.

Grove was the first President of Family House. “It was very much a shoestring operation,” he says. “After we bought the house, we didn’t have any money to pay contractors. So we did it all ourselves.”

All the furniture was donated. Even the housework was done by volunteers, including Ablin’s wife, Debbie, who sometimes cleaned rooms and washed linen. Others helped not only with housework and repairs but cooked hot meals for the families staying there.

Mike Alvarez, a colleague of Grove, handled the early legal work pro bono—that is, without charging a fee. This included establishing Family House as a not-for-profit organization so that donations to it would be tax deductible.

“It was a wonderful time of people coming together and working very hard to make Family House a reality,” Joan Finton-Baumrind, an early supporter, volunteer, oncology mom and Board Member, recalls.



a growing team of volunteers

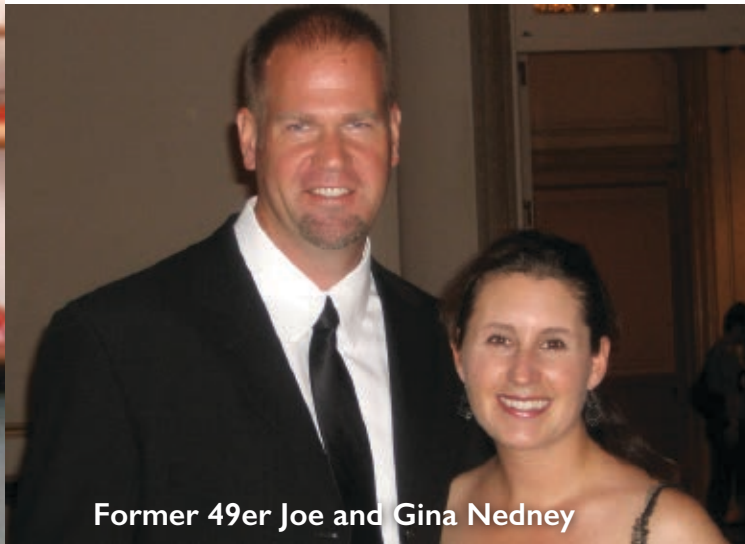
The small original group of volunteers began to grow as more people signed on to help. When John Foote and his wife lost their 11-month-old daughter to cancer, his law partner Barry Grove told him about Family House. “He said that being involved with Family House had helped him a lot,” Foote recalls. So Foote volunteered and became Family House’s Treasurer in 1986 and later was Board President.

Mary Lou Youngerman, a nurse at the UCSF hospital, was another early volunteer who became deeply involved and was president in the mid-1990s. “She brought along a tremendous amount of support from the nursing community,” Grove says.

Cele Schreiber volunteered after staying at Family House in 1983, when her son was being treated for cancer. “To come here and spend six weeks and have a house to come to—laundry, parking, everything—was just fabulous,” she says. “I’m truly grateful.”

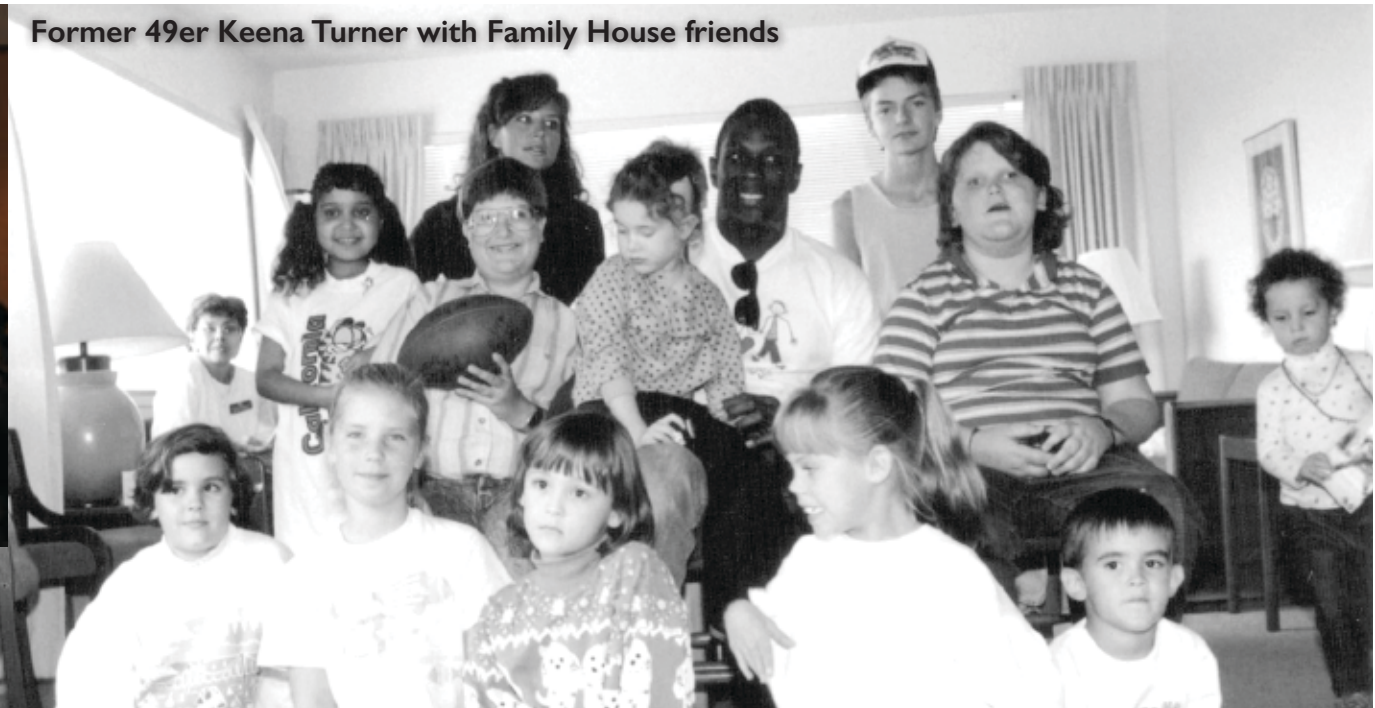
Keena Turner, a star linebacker with the San Francisco 49ers, was one of the first celebrities to join in. He attended a Family House dinner-auction in 1988 and was impressed by the organization and the work it did. He started spending some of his free time visiting the children at Family House as well as those in the hospital, often bringing along teammates. It was also through Family House that he met his wife, Linda, herself a volunteer. Both say they feel personally rewarded by their involvement with Family House. “We have met some pretty amazing kids and families with unbelievable strength,” Keena says.

More recently, the Grammy-winning pop rock band Train has been very active in its support. Jimmy Stafford, Train’s guitarist and backup vocalist, has said, “When you go there it’s really inspiring, and it’s really incredible. And it makes you want to do whatever you can to help these families.” Pat Monahan, the group’s lead singer, makes it a point to visit Family House as often as his schedule allows, to keep in touch with the children, and to bring food and gifts.



Former 49er Joe and Gina Nedney

Former 49er Keena Turner with Family House friends





Carl and Dorothy Meister --
Tuesday morning. Carl is our
handyman; you'll see Dorothy
in clinic.

--
Suzanne and Ira Summer
Weekend managers.



Linda Edwards is a hard
working Board member --
and wife of Dr. Michael
Edwards!



Quilters



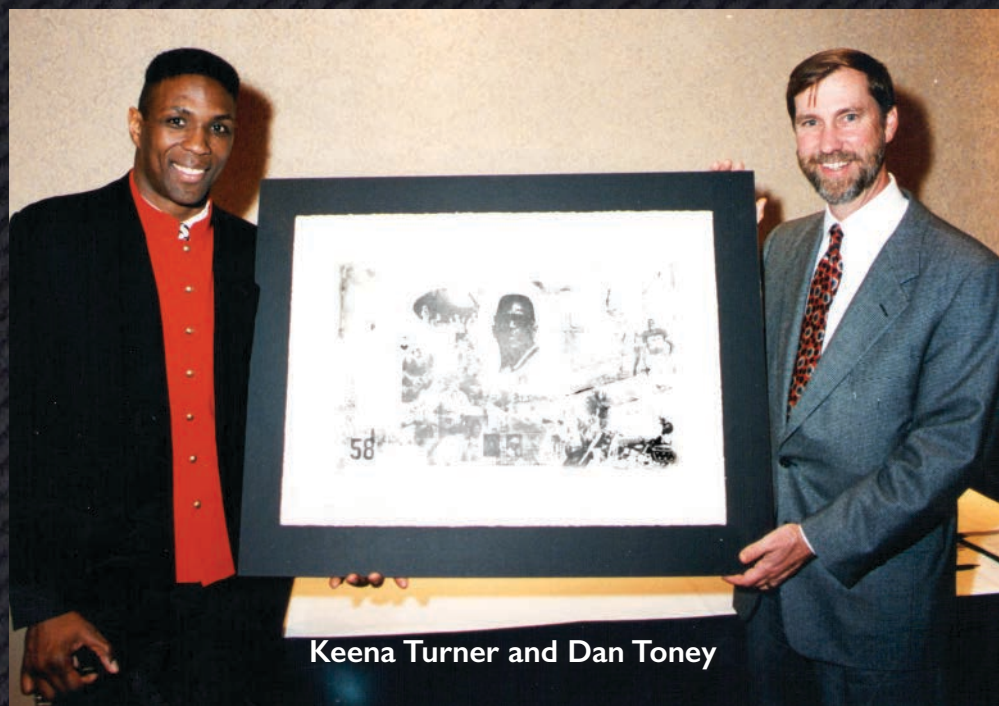


A guest with Ruth Tani

Mary Bong from the Recreation
Department comes on Mondays to
take the kids out.



Marlene Oliveira
Manager over 21 yrs



Keena Turner and Dan Toney



Kathleen Toney



David Joy

enter the staff



"The children are wonderful. They are incredibly optimistic in the face of serious illness. It's a privilege to work with them."

-Megan Margaret Sullivan, former Family House Resident Director



"It's empowering to work for a place where you see good being done in the world."

-Jessica Creager, Family House Director of Finance & Special Events

"Family House is really about family—creating a home environment that allows people to carry on some normalcy in their lives."

-Paul Goold, Family House Director of Family Services

"There is nothing I don't love about Family House."

-Kent Smith, former Family House Resident Manager



buying a second building: koret family house on 10th avenue



Once again, the Koret Foundation came through with a major naming gift, strengthening its partnership with Family House. The building was purchased, and after a year of renovations, it opened to families on October 26, 2002. The house on Irving Street had previously been enlarged to accommodate 10 families. The new building on 10th Avenue had room for 24. So the overall capacity of Family House was more than tripled by the purchase. "It turned out to be a fabulous addition," Foote says.

Because so many families had to be turned away from Family House for lack of space, Ablin and his team (Ed Conner, John Foote, and Alexandra Morgan) started searching for a second building. "We were always faced with the physical limitations of what we could offer people," Ablin says. "The number of families who needed help was much greater than we could serve."

In 2001, they identified a building on 10th Avenue, eight blocks from the hospital, that fit their needs. It was owned by an elderly couple, Fridrich and Linda Breder, who were Holocaust survivors. They had immigrated to San Francisco in 1966 and had purchased the building on 10th Avenue, turning it into a rooming house. But by 2001 they were ready to retire and sell the building. Once again, good fortune smiled on Family House. The Breders were generous and cared about people. On learning about Family House and its mission, they agreed to sell the property at a discount from market value.

There was some debate within the Family House Board of Directors about taking on the expense of adding a second building. John Foote was now Board President. He says Family House needed to raise about \$7 million to purchase, renovate, operate and endow the building. "That seemed like a struggle," he says. "But when they started the first house, they did it on faith that the money would come in. So everybody thought, well, we did it once before, we can do it again."



a new chief executive

The purchase of the second building had an unexpected offshoot: it brought Family House a new Chief Executive, Alexandra Morgan, with extensive experience in the nonprofit sector.

By 2001, Family House had grown to the point where it had a full-time, paid staff of two, although much of the work was still done by the founders and other Board Members. Board Member Kathleen Toney notes that nonprofit organizations often go through transitions as they become bigger; some nonprofits handle these transitions well, others don't. "We were buying the house on 10th Avenue," she says, "We needed to step up and add to staff and raise some money."

Morgan was brought in to head the fundraising effort. She was impressive from the start and, just two weeks after being hired, was asked to lead Family House as its Executive Director, and later as Chief Executive, the position she continues to hold today.

She focused initially not only on raising the \$7 million but also on professionalizing the Family House organization to ensure its future. "After having worked in the nonprofit sector for years, I knew what needed to be done, like creating a staff handbook, a Board handbook and a website," she says. "There were all sorts of basic elements that we were able to put in place quickly."



CEO Alexandra E. Morgan



"We felt welcomed and a part of the huge family at Family House."

"Without Family House, we would have been struggling—moving from hotel to hotel and been in debt when we lived in San Francisco for 9 months."

"I have a family of six, and during most difficult time of our lives we were all able to stay together because of Family House."



Fozzy and Linda Goldfarb with Shea and Nancy McNally



Frankie Fernandes



Scott and Becky Miller

She also worked with Ablin, George Fleharty and others to expand the Board of Directors, adding individuals with business, financial, and health-care expertise who could help Family House as it grew. One of the new Directors was Scott Miller, who was then Director of Institutional Equity Sales at Credit Suisse and is now Chief Operating Officer of Ravelin Capital, a private equity and venture capital firm. He joined the Board in 2007 and was elected Chairman in 2012. Miller had been introduced to Family House at a Cabernet for Connoisseurs event and became a volunteer. “As soon as you know what Family House does, it’s hard not to want to be eager to help out,” he says. He notes that oncology families “really value and treasure” Family House. He also praises the Family House staff. “You are immediately taken by how incredible they are, how genuine and compassionate they are. They go to work every day with a positive attitude. They truly care about the families and do everything possible to help them.”

moving to mission bay



Today Family House has entered a major new phase: as of March 2016, it is located in a brand-new building in the Mission Bay section of San Francisco—a building with room for 80 families, more than double the combined capacity of the old Irving Street and 10th Avenue locations. How the new building came about is a somewhat complicated story with several twists and turns along the way.

In 1998, the San Francisco Board of Supervisors voted to revitalize the Mission Bay neighborhood, an industrial and railyard area that had fallen into decline. The San Francisco Redevelopment Agency took charge of the project and began seeking developers to put up housing, offices and other buildings.

A few years later, the UCSF Benioff Children's Hospital announced plans to participate in the project by relocating to Mission Bay and constructing a new hospital there. This meant that Family House would have to move as well, since the children staying at Family House need to have quick, easy access to the hospital.

Architect Roger Swanson joined the Family House Board of Directors in 2008, shortly after the Children's Hospital announced its plans. He says, "All the Board discussions were dominated by 'the Children's Hospital is moving and we're going to have to move also.'" Simultaneously, Anne and Paul Finigan reached out to Bernie Orsi, Chairman of the Kalmanovitz Foundation, for an initial major campaign gift that gave the fundraising effort great momentum.

Family House began searching for land on which to build in Mission Bay. Swanson says, "After we looked at several sites, UCSF came through for us in a very nice way and offered us Block 7 East." UCSF owned but didn't need that particular block of land and thus was able to make it available to Family House, along with master developer, Related. There was one major caveat: the transfer to Family House had to be approved by the Redevelopment Agency.

However, the situation was thrown into turmoil in January 2011 when the California legislature dissolved all the Redevelopment Agencies in the state. Suddenly, the San Francisco Redevelopment Agency no longer existed, and it was unclear which agency, if any, now had the authority to approve the land transfer to Family House. It took more than two years to sort out the details, but thanks to Project Counsel Sue Diamond and others, Family House was finally able to acquire the land in June 2013 with approval from the Redevelopment Agency's successor agency. "It was a very momentous occasion when we actually acquired it because it had been a long time coming and had been a real challenge," Karen Tiedemann, a land-use attorney who worked with Family House, says.





Drew and Amy McKnight

By then, Richard Stacy of Leddy Maytum Stacy Architects was already well along in designing the new building. Stacy says his goal was to create a structure that was not only functional but “provides a refuge for the families to relieve some of the stress they are going through.” In working with the site, which is relatively long and narrow, Stacy created a u-shaped building with an inner courtyard for use by the families. The building also includes exercise, teen and music rooms and other facilities. In 2013, as the design was being finalized, Alexandra Morgan wrote, “To say this is a thrilling step is to understate the palpable energy that our staff, Board of Directors, donors, volunteers, and families feel.”

Ground was broken on September 17, 2014, and the building was completed and opened to families 18 months later.



Architect Richard Stacy with Family House staff Sarah Yaeger, Greg Mora, Jessica Creager, and Amy Lenz







The O'Callahan Family



Keena and Linda Turner



Jennifer Montana, Michele Molfino,
Camilla Burraston, and Corey Hyde



Former 49er Ronnie and Karen Lott at Family House on Christmas Eve

"Family House is like a miracle."

"I couldn't imagine going through this treatment without Family House."

"No matter what stress our family had go through, knowing we had a place to stay where people cared tremendously was always a comfort."



Cele Schreiber



Peyton and Dakota



Tattenai Villaba



Thomas and Jay Ferrick



Malachai Villaba

“Family House is an amazing place.” · “I don’t know what we would have done without you.” · “You are a calm in the storm.”



The Nancy and Stephen Grand Family House



nancy and stephen grand

Then there was the matter of finding enough money to acquire the land and to design and construct the building. Family House took on a bigger financial challenge, by far, than it ever had before: it needed to raise \$42 million.

“Because of how strongly everyone that touches Family House feels about our mission, we always knew that somehow we’d find a way to reach our goal,” Drew McKnight, Capital Campaign Chairman says. “But there were a few moments of anxiety along the way where we weren’t sure exactly how or when we’d make it!”

A breakthrough came in 2013 when philanthropists Nancy and Stephen Grand donated a significant naming gift. McKnight says, “When the Grands came forward with their gift, that moment redefined our campaign and put us in a position where supporters and newcomers went from asking ‘Do you think you can really do it?’ to saying ‘You are really going to do it, and I want to be a part of it.’”

The work of Family House resonated with the Grands because of their own personal experience. Stephen had been treated for cancer at UCSF several years earlier. During his hospitalization, he and Nancy would walk the halls together in the evening and see families sleeping on the floor so they could be near their children who were patients.



“I understood the need of these parents to be right by their children,” Nancy says. “I felt the same way about being close to Stephen and slept on the floor of his room. The difference was that I was able to go home occasionally for the respite of a shower. These families were making do with the hospital’s public restrooms.”

In another case of serendipity, like so many others that have characterized Family House over the years, the Grands happened to dine one evening with their friend, attorney Sue Diamond. Diamond was a member of the Real Estate Committee of Family House and told them about its plans for a new building and its search for a naming donor. The Grands quickly signed on. Moreover, Nancy joined the Family House Board of Directors to help raise the balance of funding needed. Alexandra Morgan says, “It was like somebody protecting us.”

The new building is named the Nancy and Stephen Grand Family House in their honor. Asked why they gave the money, Nancy Grand replies, “How could we say no? It’s about the families.” She also says, “I hope I live long enough to be able to drive by that building in 30 or 40 years and know that we were part of making this happen.”



Train's Pat Monahan and Jack Munoz



Green Day's Mike Dirnt and Susan Sangiacomo



Former SF Giants' Dave Dreveck and Austin Young

volunteers today

Family House continues to depend on volunteers to help in many ways, such as providing office assistance and organizing art and baking activities for children staying there. All told, about 2,000 people now volunteer each year. "Our volunteers are very valued and appreciated," Karen Banks, Director of Volunteer Programs, says. "And I think they go home with a smile on their face."



Shiloh Berthelson

“We wouldn’t have been able to thrive the way we did through the treatment without Family House!”

“We will forever hold Family House in our hearts.”

“Thank you Family House staff! I may have the weight of the world on my mind, but when I’m at Family House, the friends here make my world a little calmer.”



Aunetta Thompson

born out of necessity and compassion

Looking back at the history of Family House, Ablin and the other founders are proud not only of the new building but also of the way in which the little organization they created in 1981 has grown and served the needs of children with cancer and their parents.

“Family House wasn’t an accident,” Ablin says. “It happened because it had to occur. People in crisis need help. We had to help them. Family House was born out of necessity. And it was born out of compassion. Because there is so much pleasure that comes with reaching out to others in need.”