

# BUSINESS PROFILE

## Ronald McDonald House director plays a variety of roles

BY EVAN WILLIAMS

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In case you don't know where you are, a life-size statue of Ronald McDonald sits just inside the front door of the house that bears his name. Cinnamon, the poodle-mix therapy dog, scampers around, following people wherever they go.

The big kitchen is a social gathering spot. On this afternoon, student volunteers are preparing barbecued chicken as dinner for the guests, mostly out-of-town parents whose premature babies are being cared for across the street in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit at The Children's Hospital of Southwest Florida.

Debra Newman, executive director of Ronald McDonald House Charities of Southwest Florida, is the gracious general manager of this charity-cum-bed-and-breakfast for families from the five-county area who find themselves in medical limbo. It's only one of her roles as executive director.

She also develops and markets the RMH charity arm, always reaching out for partnerships or donations. And she's responsible, along with the organization's board members, for stretching an annual \$600,000 in donations to help local children in various ways. The money helps pay a portion of the food and lodging for RMH guests, who donate \$10 per night, or whatever they can afford, to stay here.

"I kind of work 24-7," she says. "If I'm out at a restaurant where I see someone who might be a potential donor or partner, look out. Generally, I'm extremely passionate

about what I do, and I think my attitude is reflected in my staff."

Ms. Newman has been a life-long advocate of nonprofits, especially those related to the medical field. Her background as a volunteer worker, nurse and a business owner suits her current position. She also sits on the Resort and Hospitality Management Program board at Florida Gulf Coast University.

As a youth in Cleveland, Ohio, she sold baked goods and Christmas cards and ran a lemonade stand for charities that helped children with birth defects. "I was like the leader on the street," she says.

She also helped raise funds for the first free medical clinic in Cleveland, and at the urging of her parents, volunteered in the coffee shop at a hospital there, to talk with soldiers who had been injured in Vietnam. Later, she served as a marketing volunteer for the Cleveland Ballet and the Cleveland Symphony Orchestra.

After earning a degree in nursing from the University of Cincinnati, she was in charge of a hospital wing that had 70 comatose patients. She would talk with them in despite getting no response. "I'd talk to a brick wall," she says. One day, she remembers, a woman who had been silent for



COURTESY PHOTO

Debra Newman, executive director of Ronald McDonald House Charities of Southwest Florida.

about a decade suddenly said "that's nice" when Ms. Newman was describing her wedding day.

In Ohio, she also ran a business called Computer Literate, a service for individuals and small businesses. Her husband, Joe, who she met in high school, owned three Ace Hardware stores there.

In 1999, the Newmans moved to South Fort Myers with "three boys, two dogs and 38,000 pounds of stuff." They had discovered the area while here for a summer baseball tournament with the boys, although Ms. Newman had vacationed in Sarasota for years and was familiar with Southwest Florida because her father had worked for Gulf American Land Corp., which created Cape Coral.

Ms. Newman started at the nonprofit Fifth Avenue Association in Naples and during five years there became aware of Ronald McDonald House Charities through its Care Mobile, a van that delivers primary medical care to Collier County families who can't get to clinics or doctors' offices. The Care Mobile is a boon for seasonal workers in Collier, and Ms. Newman wants to bring the service to Lee and other counties as well.

She joined the RMHC as executive director in December 2006. In addition to funding the Care Mobile and helping run the Ronald McDonald House, monies raised by the charities also go to organizations such as Boys & Girls Clubs, the Children's Advocacy Center and the Guadalupe Center. RMHC also awards 13 \$1,000 scholarships to college freshman each year.

When she does finally get out of the house, Ms. Newman enjoys boating, fishing, gardening and cooking. While she looks forward to traveling more and seeing the world, she also enjoys her own version of "happy hour" in the evening, by relaxing at home to a favorite CD and a dance with her husband.

"You need to take a little bit of time and be happy," she says.

But last Thursday afternoon, before that would happen, she needed to remind her staff to dress down the next day, as the RMH kitchen is about to be remodeled and they'd spend the morning cleaning out the refrigerator and cupboards. Then it was off to a hotel opening nearby, where she hoped the owner would agree to take overflow guests when the house is full. ■

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