

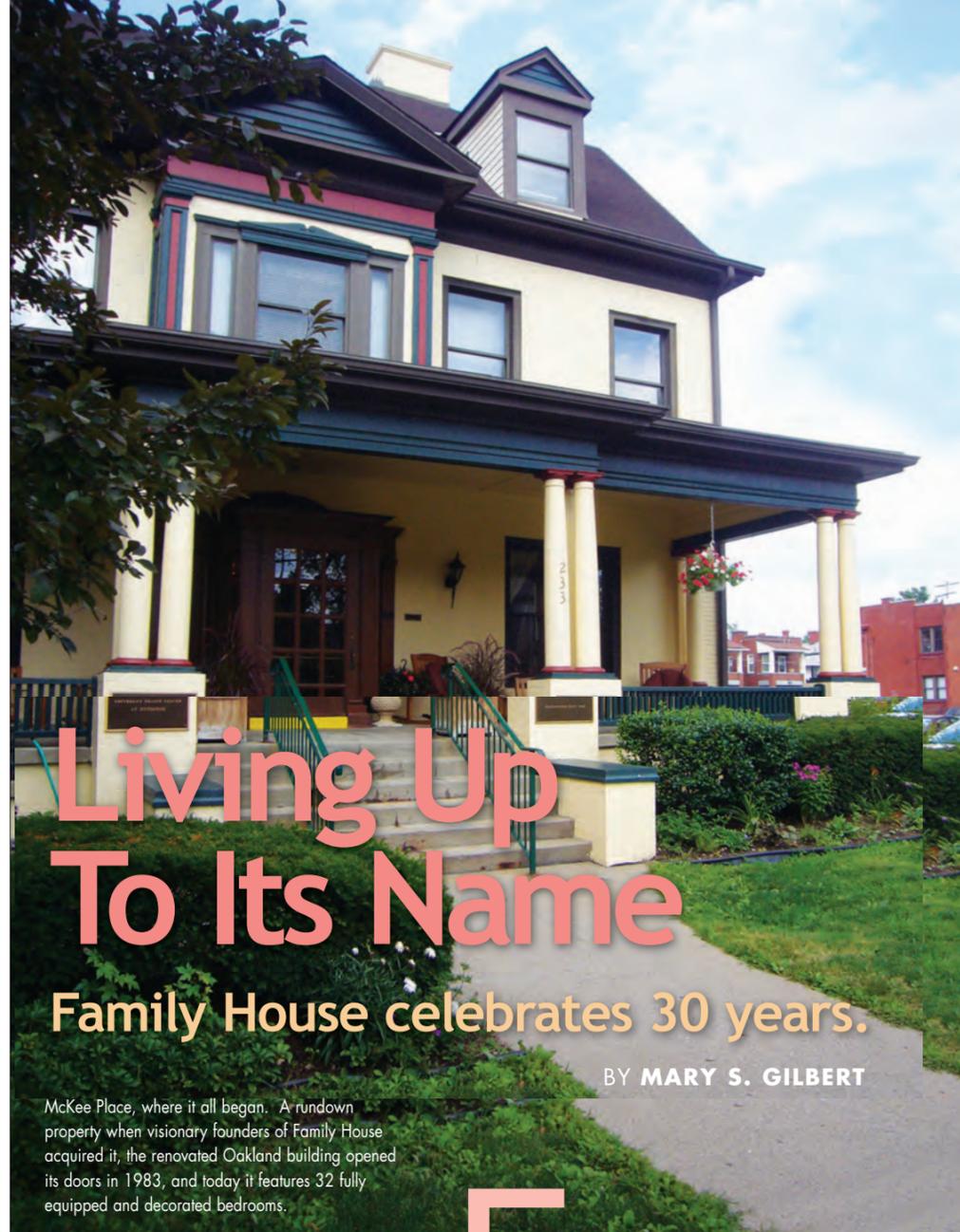


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Living Up To Its Name

Family House celebrates 30 years.

BY MARY S. GILBERT

McKee Place, where it all began. A rundown property when visionary founders of Family House acquired it, the renovated Oakland building opened its doors in 1983, and today it features 32 fully equipped and decorated bedrooms.

With the organization's 30th annual polo match upon us, the spotlight is on this indispensable home away from home and its three decades of service to patients and their families.

Flash back to the early 1980s, when Pittsburgh was first gaining global prominence for organ transplantation and other medical innovations. Thousands of critically ill patients flocked to our hospitals for surgery, treatment, and follow-up care.

Some procedures, like transplants, required a few years for recovery, meaning that visits home for some were, at best, intermittent or, at worst, delayed altogether. Oncology patients without transportation to Pittsburgh and a place to stay sometimes missed treatments. Families often slept in hospital corridors and waiting rooms because they couldn't afford lodging. Others improvised living arrangements in local hotels and apartments, yet the cost quickly became prohibitive.

The emotional burden for patients with serious medical conditions and their families, coupled with burgeoning financial costs, prompted a small group of concerned, compassionate community leaders and doctors to take action.



This Family House facility on Neville Street in Oakland was built exclusively for the organization and its guests and opened in 1989.

They formed a nonprofit organization, raising money to secure and refurbish a fixer-upper mansion on McKee Place in Oakland close to the hospitals. There, families coping with a life-threatening illness could reside temporarily in private quarters amid comfortable surroundings and pay a reasonable rate. With the communal kitchen, they could even cook meals and skip the expense of restaurant dining.

Aptly called Family House, the East End organization's mission remains essentially unchanged as it celebrates its 30th anniversary this year. Today, the independent nonprofit

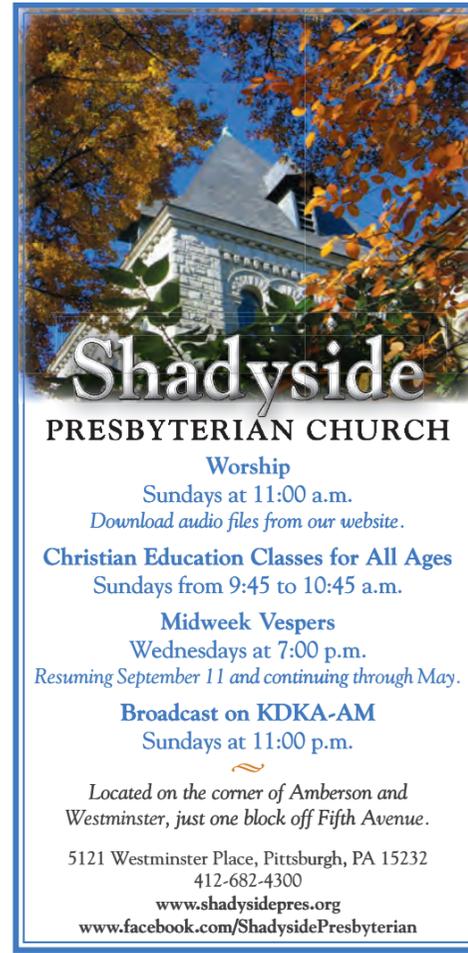
serves as an innovative model for patient and family support that has been emulated around the world.

"We provide affordable housing to people in medical and psychological stress, not just for families, but also for patients," says executive director Bob Howard.

Patients and their families also reap the health benefits of being in a calm, comfortable environment, according to Howard. "Physicians say recovery works better when they feel they're part of the community in a caring facility," he explains. "That concept wasn't understood 30 years ago."



All four Family House locations feature communal spaces, including dining areas like this one at Family House Shadyside on Centre Avenue.



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Family House

As needs grew over the years, the organization acquired and vacated a series of houses, while also securing floors in various hospitals and hotels for their guests. In addition to the original house on McKee Place, the three other Family House homes include: Neville, built by Family House on Neville Street in Oakland; Shadyside, a former apartment building on Centre Avenue; and University Place on Thackeray Avenue in Oakland, housed in the University Club's former racquet ball courts and locker room. Combined, the houses have 160 guest rooms.

It costs \$40 for single room and \$60 to \$75 for a suite that sleeps four at Family House. Laundry rooms, libraries, computers and Wi-Fi, exercise rooms, in-room televisions, shuttle transportation, 24-hour security, and educational programs are some of the amenities that help provide the comforts of home.

The concept of family takes on a heightened meaning at Family House. Guests form special bonds based on "everyone being in the same boat with a different paddle," says Stephen Urato of Webster, Massachusetts.

Urato and his wife, Kathleen, have lived at Neville House since Thanksgiving in 2011 while they wait for her to receive a small bowel transplant. Since she's on the active transplant list and needs weekly check-ups, she hasn't been able to return home. As longtime guests, they make a point of interacting with other families and helping them with logistics, including sponsoring a monthly group dinner. Urato is especially proud that the families have planted a kitchen garden.

"We've come to grow with the house," Urato says. "You make lifelong friends here. It's the 'misery loves company' kind of thing."

Family House staff members field some 1,500 inquiries each month about services or booking rooms. Handling the steady stream of calls and e-mail, guests arriving at all times of the day and night, juggling space without guests knowing in advance when they'll be able to check out, and accommodating guests' varied requests often makes Patti Likar, director of guest services, feel like an air traffic controller.

"A main concern for families is how to pay for their room day after day," says Likar, noting that catastrophic illness and extended departures from normal life can interfere with employment and sap resources. "We offer an assistance fund based on income, which is a huge help."

Indicative of the friendly and hospitable nature of Pittsburghers, Family House boasts a corps of dedicated volunteers devoting countless hours. They welcome guests, hold cooking



David Carlin (left) and Selma Weiss, volunteers from Temple Sinai in Squirrel Hill, prepare breakfast and visit with a guest at Family House Shadyside.



The annual Family House Polo Match, which began in 1983 as a simple idea for fundraiser, has become the organization's signature event, drawing crowds to Hartwood Acres each September.

demonstrations, staff events, organize game nights, and bring food.

Acknowledging volunteers is a key component of Family House's plans to mark its 30-year anniversary. The organization distributed its first 30-year service pins at its annual volunteer lunch recently and is celebrating the milestone at this year's Family House Polo Match fundraiser at Hartwood Acres. A special event will recognize everyone—physicians, volunteers, administrators, founders, donors, current guests—who has helped Family House

become the largest home-away-from-home in the country.

That Family House is 30 years old comes as no surprise to Howard "Hoddy" Hanna III, chairman and CEO of Howard Hanna Real Estate Services. Hanna has been integral to the development of Family House, from locating the first house, serving on the board, and providing a holiday dinner at Christmas with his family. His company sponsors a polo team and hosts a large tent party at the annual fundraising match.

"It's an institution with a great following and a great need," Hanna says. "I'm a big believer in volunteering, and this is a great cause to serve."

Looking ahead, Family House is aware of potential challenges, notes board member Bobbee Slotsky Kramer of Squirrel Hill, including uncertainties about the future of health care and medical insurance. An even stronger focus on fundraising and community outreach is in the long-range plan.

"We want to advance our mission and do the best we can for the families who need us," Kramer says.

It's a mission already being accomplished, one family at a time. Urato applauds the camaraderie and connections fostered by Family House. "I'm sorry we can't all live this way all the time," he says, "with people getting along and doing the best they can with what they have."

Visit www.familyhouse.org for more information.

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