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Charity offers military families shelter for the heart

By Kate Wiltrout

For months after their son was diagnosed with leukemia, Tim and Klista Najewicz hardly saw each other. If one was at Portsmouth Naval Medical Center with 4-year-old Aidan, the other would be home with their daughter, Aleksandra, then 6.

In August, days after Aidan finished his fifth round of chemotherapy, the Suffolk family spent a week renewing tattered family ties in Ocean City, Md., courtesy of the Believe in Tomorrow Children's Foundation.

"We had been two families of two for eight months," Klista Najewicz said. "Getting to be one family of four again was amazing."

For more than 20 years, the Maryland-based charity has helped the families of critically ill children escape the rigors of treatment at a handful of vacation homes in the mid-Atlantic.

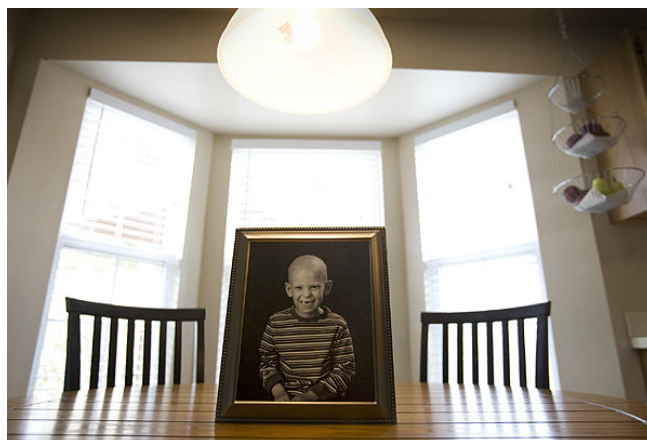
But the Najewiczes were one of the first families to stay at an Ocean City property that Believe in Tomorrow now sets aside exclusively for military families. A second vacation home for military families with ill children is under construction in the mountains of North Carolina.

Brian Morrison, the man who founded Believe in Tomorrow 26 years ago, said he has special concern for military families.

"They make so many sacrifices in their lives to provide service to this country that when they're dealing with a catastrophic illness of a child, they really deserve the support of the community," Morrison said.

For the first few days of the vacation, Tim Najewicz felt guilty accepting the foundation's generosity.

"I think we paid for one meal," said the chief petty officer, a submariner.



Laura and Charlie Gorney established a registry that will stock the kitchen of the Believe in Tomorrow House in Asheville, N.C., in memory of their son. (Bill Tiernan | The Virginian-Pilot)

They could have afforded a trip of their own, but Tim said he and Klista, a pharmacist, appreciated not having to fuss with any details. All they did was print out directions to the property and hit the road.

In addition to the lodging, Believe in Tomorrow arranges as many or as few activities as families can handle. The Najewiczes took part in a pirate adventure, a dolphin-watching trip and a spin on a Coast Guard patrol boat.

Aidan and Aleksandra both caught croaker while fishing on the Chincoteague Bay.

The family also spent time just being together.

"One of the things this experience has taught us is to live in the here and now," Klista Najewicz said.

The vacation allowed Aidan and Aleksandra to become brother and sister again. During stretches of her brother's hospital stay, Aleksandra wasn't allowed in his room. She'd wave to him from behind glass.



Walker Gorney, 4, son of Laura and Charlie Gorney died of cancer a few days after this portrait was taken in April at Portsmouth Naval Hospital. (Bill Tiernan | The Virginian-Pilot)

Their beach trip marked a new chapter.

“They really have been inseparable since we came home,” Tim Najewicz said.

Watching his kids play together in the sand and the waves helped him understand that the vacation wasn’t about charity - it was a chance for his family to reset after a harrowing experience.

“It was almost selfish of me to think like that. It wasn’t for me. It was for the family. It had been a long eight months.”

Aidan’s bone marrow is now healthy, but he’s checked monthly for signs of a relapse.

For another local family helped by the foundation, respite came in the mountains.

While their son Walker was being treated at Portsmouth this spring for Ewing’s sarcoma, a type of cancer, Laura and Charlie Gorney looked forward to a summer getaway into the mountains of western North Carolina.

There, near Hendersonville, Believe in Tomorrow is building another vacation home specifically for military families with ailing children.

The Gorneys are originally from Tennessee, and they’re not beach people, Laura Gorney said. But they knew 4-year-old Walker and his older brother, 7-year-old Mason, would enjoy some time in the woods.

Walker died before they could get there.

Believe in Tomorrow didn’t back out.

“I don’t know if it’s because of their military initiative, or it’s just the kind of organization they are, they honored the commitment they made,” Laura Gorney said.

In July, Mason, Laura and Charlie, a junior submarine officer on shore duty, spent a week at a guest cabin near the partially completed home.

“We are trying to make some new memories and adjust to this new family we now have of three people instead of four,” Laura Gorney said.

The family spent their days fishing, hiking and swimming. They rented a boat and went out on nearby Lake Lure.

Standing in front of the unfinished home one night after the workers left, the Gorneys decided they wanted to do something to give back to Believe in Tomorrow.

They considered using money from Walker’s memorial fund to make a donation to the foundation. Instead, they decided to start a registry to outfit the kitchen of the new home with a range of Pampered Chef products, so future Believe in Tomorrow families can cook up a storm, if they wish.

“I think it’s so important as a family to come together and have dinner together,” Laura Gorney said. “I wanted to give families quality things to cook dinners with, to make memorable meals with.”

She publicized the effort on a Web site she used to keep loved ones informed about Walker’s treatment.

Donors have purchased more than \$1,900 worth of Pampered Chef products on the registry, which lists wishes totaling \$2,800. The Gorneys have pledged to buy whatever remains on the registry at the end of the year.

Morrison, the founder of Believe in Tomorrow, called the gesture “an extraordinary effort.”

The foundation, which doesn’t receive any government funding, relies on in-kind contributions to build new homes. The downturn in the housing industry has slowed completion of the project, Morrison said.

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