

An Extraordinary Life

How a stunning diagnosis prompted Charlie Marino of Riverside and his late wife Gaye to bring Ronald McDonald House to Chicago

By Amy Carnahan || Photography by Tony Favarula

There is a statue of a mother and her child outside of St. Mary School and Church here in Riverside. The plaque on it reads:

MARY JO MARINO

She was the sunshinethat broke through the clouds in many lives.

January 26, 1960 December 18, 2001

The story behind this statue is why Charlie Marino moved to Riverside at the age of 80. It's in memory of Marino's daughter-in-law, a mom to three young boys at the time, who lost her battle with cancer in 2001. Her husband passed away 13 years later.

Marino moved into his son's house on Lawton Road to be here for his three grandsons as a mentor and source of stability. He has lived a remarkable life—although it has come with great personal loss. Now 89 years old, Marino continues to live each day with energy and purpose, fueled by his love of family and community.

He grew up in the Bridgeport neighborhood of Chicago inside a close-knit Italian Catholic family. Marino's parents and grandparents instilled early examples of the love and support family provides. In 1945, his younger brother Matthew, 4, was diagnosed with Leukemia. At that time, there was no treatment for the disease, and he died three months later. Marino, only 11 years old at the time, experienced the loss of a brother,

and also a family unit that fractured in the aftermath.

"It was pretty horrible for my parents, and their marriage broke up as a result of that," he said.

During Marino's time at St. Ignatius College Prep, a friend told him the White Sox were looking for bat-boys, and that anyone who was interested should go to the ballpark the next day for an interview. Marino was the only one that showed up, so the job was his.

"Sometimes, all you have to do is show up, and you get a really great job" he said.

The pay was \$1 dollar per game, plus player tips, which proved to be very lucrative for Marino in 1952, when the White Sox finished third in the American League. Soon to be off to Spring Hill College in Mobile, Ala., his \$400 tip from the players equaled half of his college tuition. After two semesters, Marino left Spring Hill, returning to Chicago to attend Northwestern Law School.

"Northwestern turned out to be a good choice, because they didn't teach you a lot of rules of law," he said. "What they did is try to teach you to think and be a problem-solver, and teach you where to look for the law."

Marino met his wife Gaye while on his summer break from law school. Gaye was from Toronto, and their paths crossed during a six-day voyage across the Atlantic Ocean from Quebec to France. Three years later, they married in Toronto. The newlyweds returned to Chicago, and eventually settled into the first

and last home Marino would ever purchase on Fairfield Ave. in Lincoln Square.

In time, the Marinos welcomed four children, and Charlie developed a thriving law practice.

"This was our family, this was our life," he said. "We were very ordinary people marching along with four kids, and life was good.—And then one day, a bomb exploded on us."

Their daughter Gage was 5 years old when Gaye noticed that she had a swollen neck. Then, a couple of days later, Gaye felt a lump under Gage's arm while bathing her. A pediatrician instructed the Marinos to make an appointment at Children's Memorial Hospital to see a cancer doctor.

Pediatric oncologist Dr. Edward Baum ordered a blood and bone marrow test, which was returned with the worst possible news.

"This was not just simple cancer—this was Stage 4 Leukemia lymphosarcoma—she had tumors everywhere," Marino said.

Dr. Baum told the Marinos about a clinical trial Gage could be enrolled in that involved nine different chemotherapy drugs and radiation for three years, which she would need to begin within a few days. The treatment was grueling, but worth it in the end, because Gage went on to live another 29 years, eventually working as a librarian, and creating beautiful art that Marino has preserved in a book to this day.

It was during Gage's years of treatment at

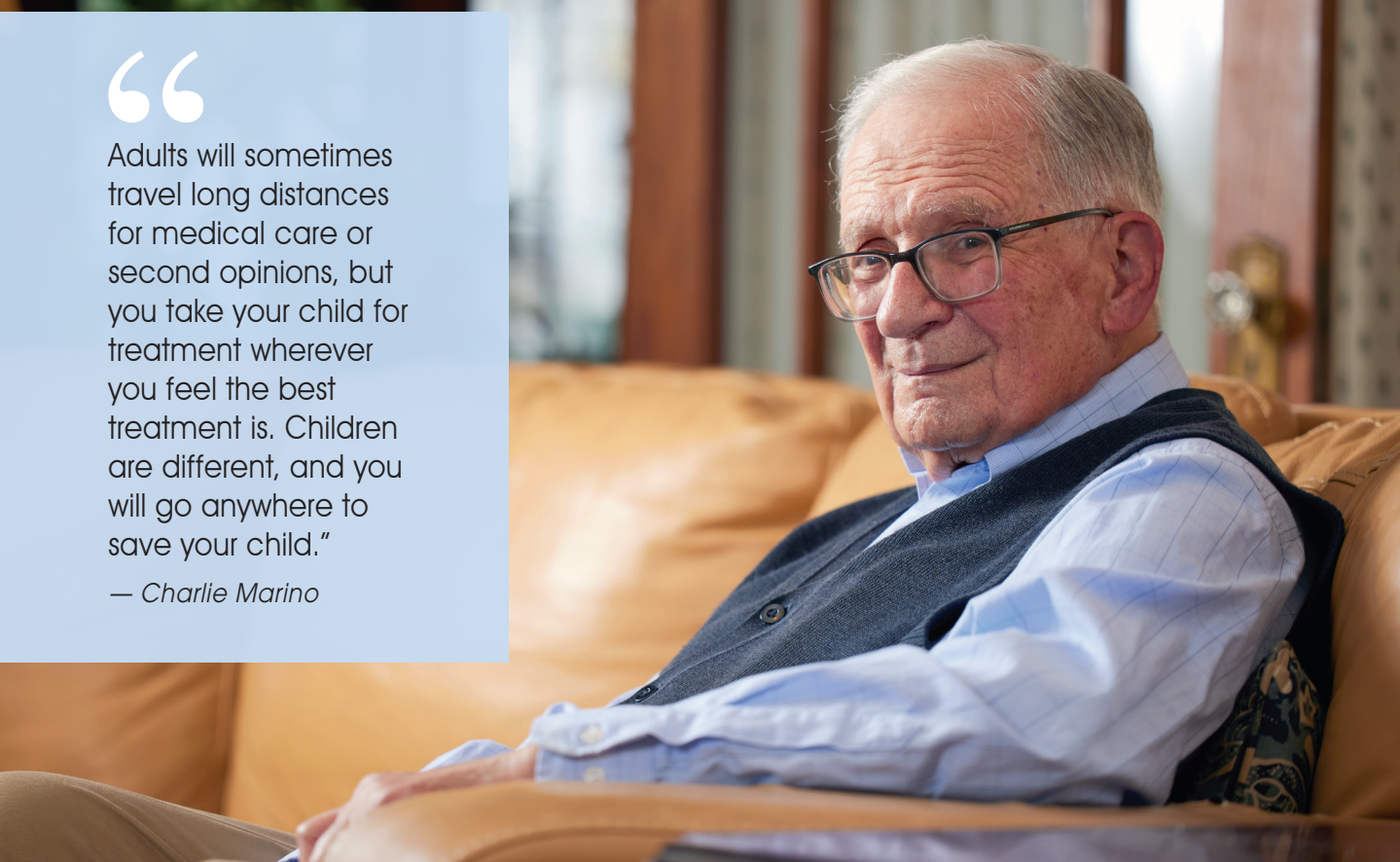
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— *Charlie Marino*



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Children’s Memorial Hospital, now known as Ann & Robert Lurie Children’s Hospital of Chicago, when the Marino’s were struck by an unmet need facing other families enduring similar circumstances. This was the 1970s, and children undergoing treatment for serious illnesses were in shared rooms, and their families were limited to visit them for ten minutes each hour.

“[We thought], ‘God is telling us something,’” Marino said. “This was so traumatic, we didn’t know what to do. Maybe what God wants us to do is find a place for them where they can go take a shower, change clothes and rest.”

They also noticed something unique about how adults access medical care for themselves, versus the extent they will go to for their children.

“Adults will sometimes travel long distances for medical care or second opinions, but you take your child for treatment wherever you feel the best treatment is,” Marino said. “Children are different, and you will go anywhere to save your child—people will travel long distances with a child that is seriously ill to get the best treatment. Sometimes they are there for weeks or months, and they need a place to stay.”

In 1974, the Marinos set out to find a place for families to stay, and honed in on houses in Lincoln Park, near the original location of the hospital. Baum informed them about a similar type of house he recently encountered during a convention he attended in Philadelphia that had opened the prior year.

The Marinos were soon on a flight to Philadelphia. Philadelphia Eagles general manager Jimmy Murray was one of the founders of this house, inspired by the child of an Eagles player that had been diagnosed with Leukemia. Murray paid for the house by contacting the local McDonald’s, and asking them if a portion of their shamrock shake sales could be used to buy the property. McDonald’s agreed, and unbeknownst to the Marinos at the time, they were about to visit the first Ronald McDonald house. Moved by what they witnessed in Philadelphia, and with an offer from Murray and his team to help duplicate a house in Chicago, the Marinos set out to find local funding and the perfect place.

In 1976, Marino contacted Fr. Fahey at St. Clement Church on Deming Place in Lincoln Park, just a stone’s-throw from the hospital. After a few go-rounds with the church’s

parish counsel, the church agreed to sell the 18-bedroom former convent for \$200,000.

The Marinos, Baum, Murray and Eagles all-pro linebacker Bill Bergey made a presentation to the McDonald’s owner-operators in the Chicago metropolitan area to request their assistance in fundraising for the house, just as they had done in Philadelphia a few years earlier. They convinced each of the 150 McDonald’s restaurant in the region to donate \$1,000 to the cause.

The remaining requisite funds came from a telethon held during halftime of an exhibition game between the Chicago Bears and Houston Oilers that year. WBBM Ch. 2 newscaster Werner Sanders hosted the telethon, which raised \$47,000 in 30 minutes, with contributions from 3,000 people. Marino kept one of those telethon checks to this day—one sent in by George S. Halas.

Once the house was purchased, it took an army of people to volunteer their time for needed renovations and repairs before opening to the public. On April 28, 1977, Chicago’s first Ronald McDonald house opened its doors to families.

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— Charlie Marino

lost a child working alongside of parents whose child was surviving; I needn't have worried, because they all worked together seamlessly,” Marino said. “The parents who had lost a child were motivated by the memory of the child—they were doing something good, and the parents who had a child that survived were grateful for that. Although they had different reasons, they all had a good reason for being there.”

The Marinos' dreams became a reality, and serves as an everlasting tribute to the monumental loves and losses in Marino's life: Matthew, Mary Jo and Gage.

The house welcomed families from all over the world who needed comfort in times of tragedy for 35 years, until 2012, when Lurie Children's moved to its current Streeterville location.

The current house, which Marino still visits today as an honorary member of Ronald McDonald House Charities of Chicagoland and Northwest Indiana's board of directors, consists of 88 bedrooms, and is located on Grand Ave., just three blocks from Lurie Children's.

The original Philadelphia and Chicago houses have multiplied into 400 Ronald McDonald houses diffused across 60 countries housing families today.

Locally, there are now six houses within the Chicagoland area, containing a total of 180 bedrooms. Today, the houses are run by RMHCCNI.

After his years of work and history with the house, Marino's role at regular board meetings is more reflective these days.

“I never say anything in a meeting unless they ask me, because I'm not current,” he said, “but I will speak if they ask me, because sometimes they want to hear stories about the past.” ♦

There are many ways to get involved at Chicago's Ronald McDonald houses, individually or as a group. Volunteering can be a family affair; since there are various programs in which children ages 10 or older can participate. For more information about Ronald McDonald House Charities of Chicagoland and Northwest Indiana, visit rmhccni.org/.



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