



# The House Love Built

by Maj. Una Cuffy  
photos by Master Sgt. Scott Wagers

*Since 1990, one program has been taking care of military families during times of medical crises. Meet three families who learned first-hand the love and support of the Fisher House program.*

**Understanding first-hand the stress experienced in watching a loved one battle a serious illness,** Vicky Connolly Locke (center), director of volunteer services at the Fisher House at Lackland Air Force Base, Texas, formed a close kinship with Jimmy and Jessica Jansen whose father, a retired Navy noncommissioned officer, undergoes treatment for cancer. "I involve them with helping me run errands, and we have some great conversations which provide a nice mental distraction for what they're going through," she said.

**A**irman 1st Class Preston Bromley was on leave in Maryland in June 2001 when he got a bad cramp in his leg during his workout. As he tried to walk it off, the cramps became worse. A few hours later he felt faint, and his temperature rose to 103 degrees.

So the maintainer from McGuire Air Force Base, N.J., went to Bethesda Naval Medical Center in Maryland for tests. He wasn't prepared for the diagnosis: acute myelogenous leukemia — a form of cancer. He was 19 years old.

When tragedy strikes, family members' thoughts race in all directions. But one of the first thoughts is to be near their loved one. And Airman Bromley's mom felt no differently. But when her son ended up traveling more than 1,400 miles for treatment at Wilford Hall Medical Center, Lackland Air Force Base, Texas, she wasn't sure how to be there for him. Staying in a hotel room while he underwent several months of treatment would be expensive. That's when she learned about the Fisher House program.

The program cares for military families during times of medical emergencies by providing a "home away from home" near military hospitals.

"I think we have received more support from the Air Force than from our family," said Sandy Bromley, the Airman's mom. "The hospital staff and the Fisher House staff have all been wonderful. Especially Cindy Burke, a social worker at Wilford Hall. She's our guardian angel."

Even though the disease forced Airman Bromley to retire his blue uniform, he still had plans to return to duty one day. He wanted to be an officer. He wanted to be a pilot. But it was not to be. He lost the fight in September 2003 when he passed away. The Fisher House program kept the family together the entire time.

"The Fisher House staff is truly a guardian angel," Mrs. Bromley said.

### **Support building**

The Fisher House program was established in 1990 by a patriotic husband and wife team, Zachary and Elizabeth Fisher. When they saw the lack of affordable lodging for families of hospitalized military people around the world, they decided to help. Following Mr. Fisher's death in 1999, his grand-nephew, Kenneth, continued the effort.

Every year, the program helps more than 8,500 families, and it has made more than 1.5 million days



of lodging available since its inception. The average cost to stay at one of the 31 Fisher Houses is no more than \$10 a day. Many offer rooms at no cost.

The program encourages guests to interact with and support one another emotionally. Each house blends with the architectural style of the area and has common kitchens and living areas surrounded by private bedrooms and baths. The houses are typically 5,000 or 7,800 square foot homes with eight to 11 suites.

"Our military members and their families are stationed worldwide and often travel great distances for

### **Fisher Houses**

The Fisher House Foundation, Inc., was formed in 1993. The foundation and many individual houses also receive support through the Combined Federal Campaign. While Fisher Houses have full-time salaried managers, they depend on volunteers and donations.

The first houses were designed and built in 1991 at the National Naval Medical Center, Bethesda, Md., and Walter Reed Army Medical Center, Washington, D.C. A year later, the Air Force received its first Fisher House — at Wilford Hall Medical Center, Lackland Air Force Base, Texas.

A second Air Force Fisher

House was added a year later, and a third one, committed to families with pediatric patients, opened in January 2001. The three houses at Lackland, together with the Admiral Boorda Center for Children with Special Needs, comprise an entire block called "Fisher Square."

— Maj. Una Cuffy

**Airman 1st Class Preston Bromley was a patient** at Wilford Hall Medical Center at Lackland during his two-year battle with cancer. While he was a patient, his mother stayed free of charge at Lackland's Fisher House. She said the staff was supportive throughout her stay.

**For more info**

For more information on the Fisher House program, go to [www.fisherhouse.org](http://www.fisherhouse.org).

specialized medical care," said Vicky Connolly Locke, Fisher House manager at Lackland. During those stressful times of having a loved one in the hospital, it's nice to be able to offer a comfortable home where families can be where they are needed most."

Ms. Locke understands first-hand the importance of being close-by a loved one. Her son, Adam, was about to graduate from basic training in May 2002 when he unexpectedly became ill and was admitted to Wilford Hall. For four months, she was at his bedside while he battled an encephalitis virus contracted from a mosquito bite. After he recovered, she accepted a permanent position as the director of

volunteer services at Lackland's Fisher House so she could help others.

"Having been a former guest here, I understand what everyone is going through," she said. "It's an honor to work with them and give something back."

Adam is now medically retired, a full-time college student and a volunteer at the Fisher House.

**Helping others help themselves**

Diane Matthews became a guest at the Keesler Air Force Base, Miss., and Lackland Fisher Houses after her son, Senior Airman Shane Matthews, lost his left arm following injuries and complications from a December 2002 car accident.

The accident happened in Homa, La., then he was flown to New Orleans for treatment. After treatment there and at Keesler Medical Center, he was transferred to Wilford Hall to be treated by specialists in reconstructive surgery.

Airman Matthews spent a year at Wilford Hall receiving occupational therapy to resolve pain and desensitize his arm, scar massages to break up the scar tissues, and physical therapy to strengthen his shoulder and his arm for mobility.

Mrs. Matthews was with him at her no-cost home away from home. Her support helped the 27-year-old orthotist keep a positive outlook for his future during treatments.

"It's great to have someone with you as your moral supporter, and that's what my mom has been for me," he said. "If allowed to stay on active duty, I can provide a better service to our orthotic patients. I now understand what a patient goes through."

Airman Matthews has been reinstated and is back in his job at Keesler. He sees the Fisher Houses as a gift.

"It's a blessing," he said. "The Fisher House at Lackland provided for all of my needs. Without the houses, many families wouldn't be able to be with their family members while they're receiving care during stressful and emotional times." ☺

**Where are they?**

There are 31 Fisher Houses in 15 states and Europe, including seven houses at five Air Force bases. They are Travis Air Force Base, Calif., Andrews Air Force Base, Md., Keesler Air Force Base, Miss., Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, Ohio, and Lackland Air Force Base, Texas. For a complete list of Fisher Houses, go to [www.af.mil/news/airman/fisher/sb2](http://www.af.mil/news/airman/fisher/sb2).



**While undergoing a lengthy rehabilitation for the loss of his left arm following an automobile accident,**

Senior Airman Shane Matthews is kept company by his 4-year-old niece, Aja. The jungle-like children's activity room was painted by Kayla Stevens, the wife of a Wilford Hall medical officer, and incorporates hidden hearts that blend with wild animals and vegetation.

**By the numbers**

Families receive lodging, food, transportation and amenities free of charge at Fisher Houses on Lackland Air Force Base, Texas. The three facilities have 25 fully furnished rooms for three to four people, most with private baths. Each suite includes room phones and cable television/VCR, laundry facilities, housekeeping services and transportation to and from Wilford Hall Medical Center.

Consider this:

- The average length of stay for nonpediatric patient families is 17 days.
- Longest stay has been 335 days.
- More than 3,900 families have been served since the first Air Force Fisher House opened in 1992.
- Families have stayed more than 70,000 nights.
- Families saved more than \$275,000 in food costs each year.
- Families saved almost \$3.8 million in lodging costs.
- A caring staff member is available 24 hours a day to assist guests.
- Each year, about 500 volunteers contribute about 10,000 hours.

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