

heartstrings

Fall/Winter 2021

In this issue

Holding Onto Hope
Ways You Have Helped
The Season of Giving
Save The Date
Cornerstone Programs
Volunteer Opportunities



Kevin McDowell, 2021 USA Olympic Triathlete



Ronald McDonald
House Charities®
of Southern Colorado

holding onto hope

It wasn't that long ago when Traci McDowell was one of the moms gripped by fear when it came to the health and well-being of her child.

Reflecting on why she volunteers for Ronald McDonald House Charities, Traci said, "Hopefully, I can help someone else who is struggling." She went on, "I want to give them hope and help them breathe a bit easier."

Traci will forever remember the day when she was volunteering at the Ronald McDonald House. "A young boy came to the office to check out a video game.", she said. Traci saw his chemotherapy port. They exchanged a smile. The boy asked why she chose to help at the Ronald McDonald House. "I told him I had a son who was sick." Traci said. The young boy asked, "What did your son have?" Traci told him Kevin had Hodgkin's Lymphoma. The young boy's voice softened. "I have Hodgkin's Lymphoma.", he said.

He paused and looked into her eyes and then asked, "Could you please come and talk to my Mom?" He explained that she was in the other room, crying. "She is afraid I'm going to die.", he said. Traci followed him into the game room. For the next 30 minutes the young man was able to just be a kid, trying to beat a video game while Traci sat with his mom. Sometimes, there were words; other times, just silence. There were questions, too. "Will he beat this? Did your son beat this?", his mom asked. Mostly, though, there was simply a comforting, knowing presence. Both moms felt it from their time together.



Often in life, when we find that we don't have our own, we can lean in and 'borrow' someone else's hope.



Traci, Kevin, Jill & Mark McDowell

It was 10 years ago when Kevin, an elite athlete, had just returned home after competing in his first professional triathlon (the world championships were six months earlier). Racing with competitors older than he, Kevin finished in the top 10. Excelling at his sport, it was one of the best races of his life.

"I remember he and I sitting together, chatting," Traci said. "I remember it was cold out and he was wearing just a t-shirt, which was unusual." While they talked, the collar of Kevin's shirt moved - just enough that Traci saw a mass. A Registered Nurse, she had a visceral response. "I remember feeling nauseous."

Later that night, Traci shared her concerns with her husband, Mark. His gut reaction was that Kevin wasn't sick. Mark thought, "There's no way he has cancer. Look at the way he just raced." It was true. Kevin had been running five minute miles. A dedicated triathlete competing on a world stage, he was at the top of his game.

Looking back, this family recalled the times when Kevin felt fatigued. Some days, he had trouble breathing and he would occasionally experience pain in his chest. They all chalked it up to intense training and competing. Everyone wanted to believe that Kevin was fine. That he would be fine. After all, he was so strong.

Appointments were made for the next day. There were many tests.

Awaiting results, their family was scattered; Traci was at home, Mark was at work and younger sister, Jill, was at school. Kevin was speaking to a youth group at a local church, encouraging them in their pursuits.

When Kevin finished, a young man came up and gave him a special coin – he said it was to help Kevin – that it was to heal him. Kevin tried to give it back, but the young man insisted he keep it.

Looking back now, the McDowell's marvel at the message - at the gift of hope - even when they didn't yet know what the news was about to be.

When the phone rang, Traci answered. The voice on the other end confirmed their worst fear. It was cancer. Hodgins's Lymphoma. No one wanted to believe it was true.

Mark came home. As a couple, he and Traci told Kevin together. Mark stayed home with Kevin while Traci went to Jill's basketball game, as Jill had been counting on her mom being there. Playing the game of her life, Jill remembered that day. "It's as if I went from 'Cloud 9', to feeling as if my world was crumbling beneath my feet." She paused. "When I got back home and learned Kevin had cancer, I remember running upstairs, crying."

As they pressed in to the "new normal", the McDowell's found their rhythm. Traci's years of experience as a nurse helped; she understood the language, the protocols and the treatment plans. Mark's support for his family came in many other ways. Together, their strengths helped this family get through a very difficult time.



Traci & Kevin at our Ronald McDonald House

Kevin recalled being 10 years old when he requested his first (and only) family meeting. "I told my mom and dad that I wanted to be a triathlete." Knowing the extreme commitment and training required, (with super early mornings), Traci and Mark encouraged Kevin to try other sports – "What about baseball?" they asked. "Soccer is fun!" they said. For Kevin, those were fine, and - he really wanted to do all three sports, swimming, running and cycling. He learned he was pretty good at it, too. Kevin's parents agreed to let him be on the team, but ONLY if he kept his grades up and only until he missed the 3x/week 5:15 am swimming practice time, "which he never did.", Traci said. "It was only 30 minutes from my house." Kevin said, smiling. Cycling practice was a mile away. Of course, Kevin pedaled there.

The years that followed were filled with practices, camaraderie, travel, meals, competitions, training and more. Kevin was doing what he loved. He was living his dream. Jill and the family would join him on some of his pursuits. Wise for her age, Jill picked which events she could go to, cheering her brother on. Singapore and Australia made the lists. (And, she stayed home when he competed in Ohio.)

At 15, Kevin was the youngest member of the USA Triathlon team. Winning 1st at nationals got him a place on the world team. Nearly medaling, coming in 4th in the world, Kevin's eyes lit up. He said, "That hit a spark. I got more serious. I thought about making this my profession."



Kevin McDowell

"When I got home and heard the diagnosis, I couldn't believe I was sick." Kevin remembers. He got quiet.

The consensus was that this was 'beatable'. So, Kevin set out to attack Hodgkin's Lymphoma the same way he had tackled other adversity's in his eight years of competition. "I went to practice that night. I remember my teammates were crying." He recalled not wanting to be labeled, as he knew he was so much more than his diagnosis. Kevin remembers his teammates came around him and prayed.



Kevin McDowell

Researching, Mark read about the power of a positive outlook. Talking with Kevin, this family forged ahead. This time, they set their sights on beating cancer (versus a world champion). **They trusted that Kevin would heal. They trusted that he could again compete as a triathlete. They believed he would become an inspiration to others.**

And, he did. Kevin beat cancer. He healed. And, he again competed as a triathlete on a world stage.



If you watched the 2021 Olympics and saw Kevin McDowell racing, (receiving the best finish of any American male Olympian in the Individual race) and, later, on the podium, winning a silver medal for Mixed Triathlon Relay, surely, you, like us, were inspired!

The decade between diagnosis and competing in the 2021 Olympics wasn't always easy.

Chemotherapy was hard and took a toll. Along with losing his hair, Kevin fought to not lose heart. "One time, I remember thinking, 'maybe I should give it all up.' I felt like I was hitting my head against a brick wall," he said. Those ten years included time to grieve, time to learn a different, new way for Kevin's body and opportunities for new growth – physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually.

Finishing chemotherapy, Kevin left what was his home in Geneva, IL, arriving in Colorado Springs, CO to attend UCCS and train at the Olympic Training Center. His parents followed suit, arriving in Colorado Springs after Jill left to pursue her nursing degree at Belmont.

Their family is together again. Jill is working at UCHHealth, Memorial Central as a cardiac nurse. Kevin is training seven days a week and Traci and Mark pursue their love of the outdoors and all things beautiful in Colorado when Traci isn't volunteering at the Ronald McDonald House.

At a recent "watch party" with neighbors, family and friends, there was much excitement. Cheers, shrieks and clapping filled the room with all eyes on Kevin. Everyone held their collective breath when the announcer called out the leader. For a time, Kevin McDowell was the fastest athlete in the ENTIRE WORLD, placing 6th in his event and receiving the Silver medal for the mixed relay triathlon.

And, it doesn't end there. Kevin's coach believes he is just getting started. There are high hopes for Kevin in the 2024 Olympic games. We'll be watching, for sure!



Throughout, Traci has learned the gift of being intentional with her days and being present to the moments before her. "It wasn't always like that." She said. "I remember being so angry. I would cry my eyes out - but not in front of Kevin or Jill." She went on. "I wanted to be strong for them, but *inside I felt like I was falling apart.*"

Now, I try to enjoy every minute and I don't take anything for granted. I really wish I would have lived then as I'm living, now." Reflecting, Traci said, "I remember one day when I decided I would CHOOSE to 'forget' all that was going on. And, for a moment, when I chose JOY, I found I wasn't carrying as much of the heaviness of everything else, all the time."

*It's that presence, that intentionality that our families at the Ronald McDonald House appreciate so much. **Knowing they are not alone**, that there is someone who cares, that we understand how anger and fear can mix, that HOPE is real and that there is *always a listening ear*. Our goal is for families to know they are loved, seen, heard and supported throughout their time of struggle.*

Traci is able to share her experiences and her hope for not just the mom of that young boy who courageously battled Hodgkin's Lymphoma, but also with the other families who are served by our Ronald McDonald House. Giving encouragement and sharing a smile with everyone she meets, we are blessed to know her as we are by you. Thank you for your continued support!



The McDowell Family



Kevin in the heat of competition

“Ten years ago, I was so sick. I didn't know what would happen, but I was so passionate about this sport. To be up here being in contention at the Olympic Games, I'm living the dream right now.”

Kevin McDowell,
On overcoming cancer to finish 6th at the Olympics.



ways you have helped

You've helped our guest families through heartfelt donations - working at the House - buying McDonald's fries, (we get a penny a pound) - cooking or donating a meal - creating a fundraiser - donating Wish List Items and sustaining a space. However you've helped, we thank you!



To view our annual report visit: <https://rmhcsoutherncolorado.org/about-us/annual-reports-financials>



the season of giving....

A message from Captain Dan, RMHCSC Communications Manager

The season of giving is rapidly approaching. Before launching into it, please join me as we collectively think about what giving really is?

When it comes to giving, my first thoughts drift to the daunting task of identifying, finding, purchasing and presenting gifts to people I regard as special. Today, online influencers, targeted advertising and social media have created unrealistic expectations toward gift giving and spending. **Perhaps, giving is something else, not measured in quantity yet possessing the opportunity to become so much more!**

Maybe we've lost sight of what giving is or what it could be. Gifts were shared long before the influence of social pressure. Individuals shared their talents, their time, their skills and their knowledge of one another to complete needed tasks, lend a helping hand and exchange modest, often handmade, thoughtful gifts, given not in volume but offered out of love and appreciation.

Growing up, I was an only child in a very large Polish family (my mother had 12 siblings and I, at the time, a dozen cousins who I regard as brothers and sisters). The holidays were a very special time for all of us; Christmas Eve dinner together, midnight mass followed by another feast, the opening of presents, then Christmas Day, a tour of everyone's homes. Like every family, there were occasional disagreements but we were always together no matter what. *We were family.*



Captain Dan, in plaid vest, with cousins.

My cousins and our families still get together. Each time we do, we fondly talk about those wonderful shared Christmas memories from decades ago. The conversations aren't about the gifts we received, that excitement was short lived, rather we recall the time spent together, the shared experiences from those days and the love we held and still have for each other. These are the memories we recount and hold most dear.

Perhaps this season of giving could be about giving of ourselves, sharing the gifts of our time, our passion and our complete and undivided attention toward one another.

Let the people you care about know that *nothing is more important to you than them!* I trust, that would become the perfect lasting gift we all hope to give -- a gift to be treasured through time.

Perhaps we resolve to start new traditions this season. Let's plan to tear up our Christmas list, put down our phone, walk away from our computer, our PlayStation and our big screen TVs to invest time in one another. My family will be baking and cooking together, we'll entertain together, play board games and cards with one another, share family stories, dream together and construct memories filled with each other.

Treasured moments begin when each of us are present to one another. I pray the time you spend with loved ones this holiday will become cherished family memories, shared for years to come.

Best wishes to you this Holiday season!



4th Annual Sporting Clays Event

Friday, June 3rd, 2022 at the Pikes Peak gun Club. This exciting day with fellow sports enthusiasts includes EVERYTHING! Lunch, an afternoon shoot, targets, ammo, gift bag, hearing & eye protection, silent and live auctions, awards and snacks & beverages after the shoot. Sponsorship & playing packages range from \$250-\$5,000. Contact Sam Milam to become a sponsor of this growing event. sam@rmhcsoutherncolorado.org



The 35th RMHCSC Anniversary Celebration

August 19, 2022 we come together to celebrate Ronald McDonald House Charities of Southern Colorado's 35 years of service for families of critically ill children. We invite you to become part of this onetime very special event. Contact Beth Alessio at beth@rmhcsoutherncolorado.org or Sam Milam at sam@rmhcsoutherncolorado.org.



The 2022 Cameron Memorial Golf Tourney

Monday, October 3rd at Perry Park Country Club in Larkspur. Sponsorships fill fast, contact Beth Alessio at beth@rmhcsoutherncolorado.org to secure your spot.

cornerstone programs

Our **Ronald McDonald House®** offers a warm, safe, clean, nurturing environment for families of seriously ill and injured children. Many families travel far from home to get specialized care, and our House serves as a home base for families whose children are receiving critical treatment at nearby medical facilities. Parents can remain close to their children, better communicate with their child's medical team and keep up with complicated treatment plans. Staying close by allows parents to focus on the health and well-being of their child, at no cost.



When a family enters a **Ronald McDonald Family Room®**, they forget they're in a medical setting. Moments away from a child's bedside, the rooms are designed as a refuge for families to rest and recharge, keeping them strong for their children. These comfortable spaces in Children's Hospital Colorado, Colorado Springs and St. Francis Medical Center provide a variety of homelike amenities.

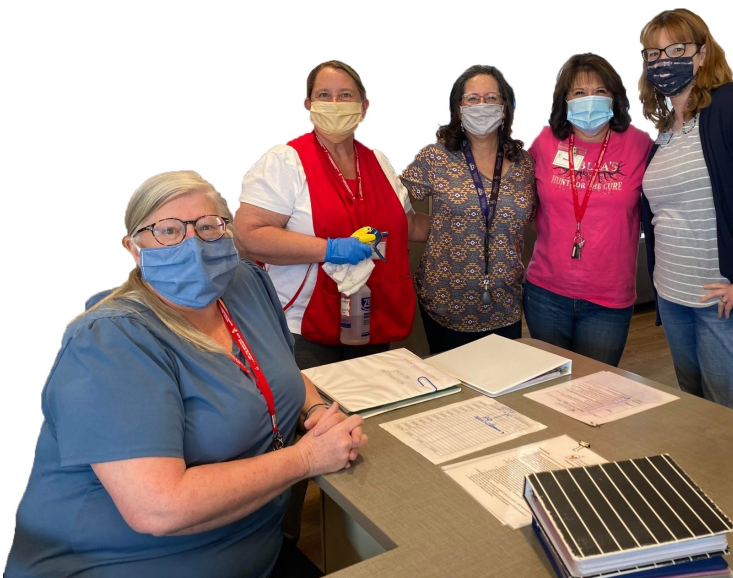




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volunteer opportunities



Our volunteers truly are the lifeblood of our organization! We are always in need of great volunteers. There are many ways individuals and groups can get involved to make a difference at our charity. Let us know your areas of interest and your availability and we'll place you in a job which will provide a sense of accomplishment and have a direct impact on the families we serve.

We have volunteer opportunities at the Ronald McDonald House and in the Ronald McDonald Family Rooms at Children's Hospital Colorado, Colorado Springs and St. Francis Medical Center.

If interested in becoming a volunteer fill out an application by visiting our website:
rmhcsoutherncolorado.org