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Bellarmino teen's dying wish becomes a reality

By Mary Gottschalk / MediaNews

Jan-Willem Knapen's dream of a home away from home for families whose children are receiving cancer treatment became a reality recently at a ceremonial groundbreaking for JW House, held at Kaiser Permanente Medical Center in Santa Clara.

JW, as Jan-Willem was known, died at age 16 on Aug. 3, 2005, of inoperable brain cancer.

Although JW died, his dream didn't.

It started in late 2002 when JW, a Bellarmine College Preparatory student, met Dr. Alan Wong. The pediatric oncologist at Kaiser soon realized JW was unlike his other patients.

"I'm very attached to all my patients. The difference between JW and other patients is he came and offered me his friendship," Wong says.

Wong frequently tells of his surprise when JW came in for an appointment and made a point of telling him he hoped he would have a nice vacation.

"Other patients would say, 'Don't leave me,' but JW said, 'Have a very nice vacation.'"

In addition to forming a friendship with Wong, JW listened to the oncologist's own dream of having a place where parents from out of town could stay while their children are treated in the hospital.

Wong didn't dwell on that conversation, but JW did.

After going into remission, JW's cancer returned in April 2004, forcing the cancellation of a long-planned family trip to Belgium, where he was born.

When JW's mother noticed his distress about the trip's cancellation and asked about it, he explained that he had been planning to ask relatives and friends in Belgium for contributions to build the house that Wong wished for.

Knapen-Asnong shared JW's hope in an e-mail to a friend who passed it on and soon JW had \$10,000 in contributions.

In May 2004, JW brought a check for \$10,000 along with him on his next visit to Wong.

Knapen-Asnong admits, "We were very skeptical in the beginning. We said let's think about a table or a television, but not a whole building ... Jan-Willem didn't worry about difficult legal things or land. It was a little bit childish, but he said, 'I'm going to build a house. That's it.'"

It didn't take long for his family, Wong and Kaiser, friends, peers at Bellarmine and total strangers to rally behind JW's dream.

For his 16th birthday, he asked for donations to JW House rather than gifts.

As his cancer spread, causing him to lose hearing in one ear and gain weight, JW's sense of humor never faltered.

Knapen-Asnong remembers trying to reassure her son during one hospitalization by telling him people were praying for him. "He said, 'Tell them to stop praying and send money. The more money they send, the better I'll feel.'"

Initially, JW thought \$250,000 would be sufficient to build JW House.

As fundraising continued and discussions started with Kaiser, reality set in and a goal of \$1.5 million.

Barbara Mount, president of the JW House Nonprofit Public Benefit Corp., says donations have ranged from \$2 to \$330,000 from a man wishing to remain anonymous. The \$1.5 million goal was reached earlier this year and it will pay for construction of JW House on the Kaiser campus, close to its Cancer Treatment Center.

"From the very beginning we've been thinking this might really happen and now it is going to happen; it makes me want to cry," she said. "It's awesome to see JW's dream catch on."

For information on JW House, visit www.jwhouse.org.