

# The Mercury News

MercuryNews.com

## Cancer victim's dream for special house comes true in Santa Clara

By Linda Goldston  
Mercury News

Article Launched: 10/24/2008 06:49:48 PM PDT

The house that JW built was unveiled to the public Friday, three years after Jan-Willem Knapen died of cancer at age 16.

JW knew he was dying from an inoperable brain tumor but he wanted to make sure that families of patients like him had a place where they could be together, "a home away from home" when the days and nights were so long.

From the original seed money of \$10,000 raised by JW's friends, the fund grew to \$2.4 million, taking in donations of a few dollars to thousands of dollars from thousands of people who shared the teenager's vision and dream.

"JW touched so many lives," Santa Clara Mayor Patricia Mahan said at the afternoon ribbon cutting for JW House, located across from the Cancer Treatment Center at Kaiser Permanente Santa Clara Medical Center on Homestead Road. "Through his work, he will touch so many more."

The Belgian native had been inspired by Ronald McDonald House and determined to have one built at Kaiser Santa Clara after Dr. Alan Wong, his beloved oncologist, said he wished he had a sanctuary to offer the families of gravely ill patients.

"The JW House is the house that was built on the power of a patient-physician friendship," said Dr.

Bernadette Loftus, physician in chief of Kaiser-Santa Clara, who is one of the many to play major roles in the house that JW built.

As the idea grew and the funds came in, a community within several communities — Kaiser, Bellarmine College Prep elementary, St. Clare Church, City of Santa Clara, and a cast of hundreds who donated money and time — united to make the dream come true.

"JW's dream could not have been accomplished without everyone in this tent today and all of the people who couldn't come. JW's motto was 'never give up' and that motto will be with us forever," said Mary Ann Barnes, senior vice president and area manager for Kaiser.

The 5,700 square foot house, in beige with brown trim, can accommodate four families. It has two studio apartments and two one-bedroom apartments. The apartments have a private garden; all four units have private baths and share a communal kitchen. The names of JW's twin sisters and young brother are inscribed above the doors.

Outside, JW House is spelled out in flowers, an extra touch that wasn't part of the plans but one that was added by Wong. He designed it, planted the pansies and alyssum to spell out JW House and has been watering it every day.

An artist painted sunflowers, JW's favorite flower, on a wall inside.

"When we have sunflowers in the house and butterflies around, it makes me think of JW," his mother, Anne Marie Knapen-Asnong said.

The family moved to San Jose from Belgium. When he was 14, JW began to have seizures and was diagnosed with three different brain tumors. Over

# The Mercury News

MercuryNews.com

the next two years, he endured surgery, radiation and chemotherapy treatments. In April 2004, a virulent inoperable brain tumor was discovered.

Before he became so ill, JW attended Bellarmine, where he sang in the choir and played percussion in the jazz band. The band played at the ceremony on Friday.

Knapen-Asnog spoke to the crowd of more than 300 at the ribbon cutting for the house and recalled the day her son talked about why he liked Dr. Wong so much — why it mattered so much to do something good for him.

She was so touched she wrote down the things her son was saying: "Dr. Wong develops a special bond with each patient. He is a nice and cool dude. He knows what's really good in life — Chinese food and Belgian chocolates. He's like my best friend. I would do anything for him. We're going to build a house."

If JW could have been at the ribbon cutting on Friday, his mother said she knows what he would have said: "See, we did it."

**Contact Linda Goldston at [lgoldston@mercurynews.com](mailto:lgoldston@mercurynews.com) or (408) 920-5862.**