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## Teen's wish comes true with opening of JW House

By Mary Gottschalk  
Rose Garden Resident

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Jan-Willem Knapen's inspirational dream of a residence house where families can stay while their children undergo cancer treatments came true on Oct. 24 with the grand opening of JW House on the Kaiser Hospital campus in Santa Clara.

JW, as his family and friends called him, died on Aug. 3, 2005, but not before launching a drive to build what is now known as JW House.

"This is Jan-Willem's dream and beyond," says Anne Marie Knapen, his mother.

"He would be so happy. It's just what he wanted, a home away from home. When you walk in, it feels nothing like a hospital. It's totally warm, like a home."

A student at Bellarmine College Preparatory and just 16 when he lost his battle with cancer, JW knew firsthand of the need for such a place.

When he was sent to a Kaiser hospital in Sacramento for brain surgery, JW's mother stayed with him, sleeping in a hospital chair. There was no place for his father Geert, his younger twin sisters Elisabeth and Helena or his little brother Alexander to stay.

It was conversations with Dr. Alan Wong, his pediatric oncologist, that caused JW to formulate his plan.

The two met in late 2002 when Wong first started treating JW, and from the start, their relationship went beyond doctor and patient and a deep friendship was formed.

After Wong mentioned that he wished there were a place for families to stay so they could be near children undergoing cancer treatment, JW formulated a plan to raise money and build such a house.

In April 2004, just as his family was readying a trip to their native Belgium for a reception with family and friends, JW's cancer returned. The trip had to be cancelled, and Knapen soon learned why her oldest son was so disappointed.

"He said, 'If there's no reception, there's no money for Dr. Wong,'" Knapen recalls.

That was when Knapen learned that JW had been planning to ask everyone for contributions to build a house.

Knapen shared the story in an e-mail to a friend in Belgium, who forwarded it to others, and soon JW had \$10,000 in contributions.

In May 2004, JW gave Wong a check for \$10,000.

At the time, JW believed \$250,000 was enough to build his dream house.

It ended up costing \$1.5 million for the building and another \$750,000 for furnishings, linens, supplies and to start an operating budget.

JW spent the last two years of his life working to raise money, in between surgery, radiation and chemotherapy treatments.

Help came in the form of Barbara Mount, JW's

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liturgical music teacher at Bellarmine, who introduced JW to Helen Marchese Owen, well known for her fundraising efforts.

Owen and Mount joined forces with Knapen and Wong to start a nonprofit entity and to raise money.

Their first project was an exhibition and sale of JW's artwork at the Triton Museum, bringing in close to \$22,000.

Golf tournaments, dinners, bake sales by Kaiser employees and other events followed, including the sale of blue rubber wrist bands imprinted with JW's personal motto, "Never ever give up!"

At the time of JW's death, some \$500,000 had been raised.

"Raising the first million seemed like it took a long time, but getting the second million was the toughest," Owen says.

Although Kaiser donated the land JW House sits on, it required the board of JW House to raise money in advance of any work being performed.

"One of the toughest times was December of 2007, when we thought we might have to come to a halt on the building," Owen recalls.

"We needed \$100,000 before Dec. 21 to continue with the building, and we found that out on Dec. 12.

"Abby and John Sobrato and their sons Jeff and John personally donated the money and rescued us.

"TBI Construction, which was building JW House, went out and asked for more in-kind donations such as the stone for the outside, so by the first of the year we knew we would be able to continue and probably open the doors by early fall."

JW House has four suites for families to stay in, as well as a small day room for those looking for solitude. The large kitchen is communal, as is the dining room with several tables and chair settings, a great room with a fireplace and an entertainment area for television and games.

Each suite has a small, semi-private patio, and the back yard is already landscaped with grass, flowers and trees.

In the hallway hangs a handmade quilt of the JW House logo made by Katleen Willems, Knapen's close friend in Belgium.

Although the house is now open to families in need, the fundraising is far from over.

"We have to keep it running, and we need a lot of money and volunteers, of course," Knapen says.

Owen agrees, saying, "JW would love this house.

"Every room you walk into has a brightness and warmth. You can feel a big smile coming over the house."

**For additional information on donating to or volunteering at JW House, visit [www.jwhouse.org](http://www.jwhouse.org) or call (408) 246-2224.**