



Erin GAAB Daily Review 12/6/04

The Markie Foundation donated \$15,000 to support the opening of George Mark Children's House, including \$3,000 to furnish the playroom and \$12,000 for sibling bereavement programs.

Kids' hospice rewards many

AS I PUSH open the clean, white doors of George Mark Children's House, two squealing little girls with bouncy pigtails charge toward me with their arms outstretched. I hardly have enough time to say hello before they collide with me, embracing my knees, almost knocking me backward onto the carpet with the force of their small bodies.

"Where were you yesterday?" asks one of them. "We missed you!"

Before I open my mouth to answer, the girls take off running with their crayon-sized fingers gripping my pinkies. First, we dash up the play structure and slide down the plastic slide until our hair starts standing up from the static. Then the girls hop on their tricycles and pedal through the gardens shrieking, "Chase me! Chase me!"

When the sun starts to set, we stash the bikes and helmets outside and retire to the playroom of the house in San Leandro — the first free-standing children's end-of-life and respite-care facility in the United States. The home was designed to support children with life-limiting or terminal illnesses and their families.

I've been a "peer volunteer" at George Mark Children's House since shortly after its doors opened at the end of last spring. I've played, read, worked with arts and crafts, and interacted with the patients and their families on a friend-to-friend basis. Sometimes I leave laughing at the end of my shift, and other times I leave with a heart pounding with compassion.

Please see GAAB, Local 2

Children's hospice rewarding place for many

GAAB, from Local 1

I've yet to leave the house without a lesson learned from the kids or staff members.

The playroom at George Mark is a child's wonderland. Sunlight pours through its tall windows by day, and overhanging lights shine down on the toys at night. A piano waits patiently for tiny fingers to press its keys. Piles of puppets, stacks of puzzles and board games, boxes of dollhouse characters, rows of colorful books and an endless array of building blocks seem to shout, "Pick me!" The room becomes complete with child-size tables and little chairs, a train racing around a beautiful railroad track, assorted games and a comfortable couch. It's hard to keep from getting lost in the pure excitement of anticipation.

That room is only one of the fantastic, imagination-inspiring sites at George Mark. The house also has an art room, computer

room, indoor spa, music room and incredible landscaping. Each of the children's rooms has a different mural from a storybook, with bedroom accessories matching the theme.

The staff is phenomenal. Never in my life have I met a group of people more friendly or accepting. From management to maintenance workers to nurses to volunteers, the George Mark family has committed itself to making others feel welcome, and its mission is being fulfilled.

Being a peer volunteer at George Mark has filled a place in my heart that I didn't know existed. Through playing with the patients, siblings and friends who stay at or visit the house, I've been able to connect with them on a different level.

During the weeks that the pigtailed girls stayed at the house while their mother cared for their sick little brother, the girls were forced to deviate from their previous normal, daily lives. They had to adjust to

their mother's schedule, which depended on the baby's condition. I'm sure that they fought many inner battles of frustration and confusion. The transition between the life and death of a loved one is painful for anyone, not to mention a preschooler.

I can't even comprehend some of the things they must have felt. Yet the girls got the most out of their time at George Mark. They smiled, laughed, joked and giggled. They ran until their legs hurt, and talked until they ran out of things to say.

Despite their brother's illness, they were able to live their lives as comfortably as possible.

Thanks to this welcoming home, children in abnormal circumstances are able to get the attention they need to just be normal kids.

Erin Gaab is a senior at Castro Valley High School, Columns by area high school students run in this space on Mondays.