
SUITE RELIEF

By Laura Sussman

CONVENIENT, AFFORDABLE HOUSING HELPS LIGHTEN THE LOAD FOR PATIENTS TRAVELING TO MD ANDERSON FOR TREATMENT



Nathan Fowler, a leukemia doctor at MD Anderson, established Halo House to provide housing for leukemia, lymphoma and myeloma patients receiving long-term treatment at MD Anderson and other Texas Medical Center hospitals.

Adolfo Chavez III

Rosa Serda knew she was in for the fight of her life last year when doctors diagnosed her with breast cancer — for the third time.

The mother of three first battled the disease in 1998 and then again in 2008. Because her cancer was manageable and her life was so busy, MD Anderson doctors agreed that Rosa could undergo treatment at home in McAllen, Texas, with periodic visits to Houston.

But when the cancer returned recently in a more complicated form, Rosa understood she needed to receive all her care at MD Anderson's Texas Medical Center campus in Houston. However, repeatedly making the 700-mile round-trip drive between McAllen and Houston became difficult for Rosa and her husband, Ángel.

"Often we'd leave McAllen for my appointments before 3 a.m.," Rosa remembers.

The bills mounted, and when Rosa learned she'd need to remain in Houston for six weeks of radiation, she and Ángel, a retired probation officer, scoured the city for a reasonably priced hotel or apartment.

They were about to sign a short-term lease when Rosa received a call from her MD Anderson social worker. She told Rosa about Suites of Hope, a nonprofit organization that provides affordable, furnished housing to out-of-town breast cancer patients enrolled in MD Anderson clinical trials. A condominium had just become available and she wondered if the Serdas might be interested in staying there cost-free.

Suites of Hope was founded in 2012 by Rachel Midgett, who was just 37 when she was diagnosed with metastatic breast cancer. Despite her diagnosis, Rachel always felt blessed to live just five minutes away from MD Anderson, says her husband, Clint.

"She was struck by how many people traveled so far to come here for help," he says.

Rachel met another metastatic breast cancer patient who she learned couldn't afford to come to MD Anderson for treatment if it weren't for the generosity of someone who paid for her hotel stay. Inspired by the story, Rachel came home one day and told Clint she had an idea to provide lodging for breast cancer patients who traveled to the institution for care.

Once Rachel got the idea to purchase a condo, she was unstoppable, Clint recalls.

"She located one to buy, secured a mortgage, closed the deal, then set about furnishing it so others would feel at home," he says. "And she did all this while holding down a full-time job and battling cancer."

Rachel died of her breast cancer in August 2013, less than a year after Suites of Hope opened its doors.

"I'm going to be eternally grateful to Ms. Rachel for her beautiful act of kindness," Rosa says. "Financially, it's lifted a burden that weighed heavy. Mentally and emotionally, this is a tremendous blessing," she adds. "It's truly a godsend."

Each tenant leaves the condo a little better than when they arrived, Clint says, adding their own personal touches such as needlepoint designs or a list of recommended restaurants and attractions in the area.

Suites of Hope plans to open a second condo soon.



Breast cancer patient Rosa Serda and her husband, Ángel, live in McAllen, Texas, but stay at Suites of Hope in Houston while she undergoes treatment.
 © Wyatt McSpadden

MATTHEW'S MIRACLE HOUSE

When Matthew Rager was diagnosed with brain cancer at age 5, his entire family moved from California to Texas so he could be treated at MD Anderson's Proton Therapy Center.

Representatives with the Jimmy Burns Foundation, a charity named for a cancer patient who lost his battle with leukemia, heard about the family's plight and footed the housing bill.

"It still gives me chills," says Matthew's mom, Denise. "It was such a blessing."

Not long after Matthew successfully completed treatment, the Ragers received a family inheritance. Remembering how they were helped by the Jimmy Burns Foundation, the family decided to "pay the kindness forward." They purchased a two-bedroom condo and remodeled it for out-of-town cancer patients and their families.

Yet a week before they were to close escrow, Matthew's father, Eric, was diagnosed with testicular cancer. As he underwent treatment at MD Anderson, the Ragers became the first guests in their own condo. Seven years later, both father and son are cancer free.

Matthew's Miracle House provides reduced-cost housing to patients undergoing treatment and their family members. About half the patients are children treated at MD Anderson Children's Cancer Hospital.

Denise and Eric continue to "pay it forward." They've adopted two children, and Denise is back in school, studying to be a social worker.

"Cancer changed our priorities and how we choose to live our lives," she says.



In 2012, Rachel Midgett founded Suites of Hope for breast cancer patients who travel to MD Anderson for care. Once Rachel got the idea to purchase a condo, she was unstoppable, says her husband, Clint.  Wyatt McSpadden

HALO HOUSE

A chance encounter with a patient changed the life of Nathan Fowler, M.D., and inspired him to dream big.

As the patient was being wheeled in for a CT scan, Fowler noticed he had tears in his eyes.

"He told me all that he'd sacrificed to leave Florida and receive care — his house, his job, his sense of security," recalls Fowler, associate professor in Lymphoma/Myeloma. "He'd spent much of his savings on hotels for his family during his treatments, and was devastated by the idea that he'd be leaving his family with nothing."

Moved by that encounter, Fowler established a grassroots nonprofit organization called Halo House Foundation to provide housing for leukemia, lymphoma and myeloma patients receiving long-term treatment at MD Anderson and other Texas Medical Center hospitals.

Halo House opened its doors in January 2011 with two apartments, and now has eight furnished units, with more on the way. A capital campaign has been launched to build a new facility with 22 apartments, a large community room for families to gather for group meals, an interfaith chapel, a fitness center and plenty of peaceful "green space." Recently, the foundation celebrated a milestone of providing more than 9,000 days of housing to families from 19 states and four countries.

"At the beginning, it was just a few close friends and family members with me trying to get this off the ground," Fowler says. "The support we've received from the community and beyond has been amazing. It's really allowed Halo House to take on a life of its own and offer so much more than just housing for patients."



Nathan Fowler was inspired to start Halo House by a patient who spent much of his savings on hotels for his family.  Adolfo Chavez III