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Winning bid yields backyard dream playhouse

Five-year-old gets dream playhouse after parents win auction to benefit Ronald McDonald Family Room

October 31, 2012 | By Paige Fumo Fox, Special to the Tribune

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Once Johnathan Arkell's parents were the successful bidders on a dream playhouse as part of a fundraiser for the Ronald McDonald Family Room at Edward Hospital, the 5-year-old started making his wishes known.

He wanted a lookout tower and a covered porch. His house had to have a red door and be decorated inside with a transportation theme. After all, it was to become the perfect place to play with Matchbox cars.



Sandy Arkell of Hinsdale won this pl...

The playhouse, purchased at a live auction staged by the Hinsdale Junior Woman's Club, went up this summer with donated materials and workers in the Arkells' backyard, where it was blended in through landscaping.

"(The playhouse) seems like a bit of an indulgence, but it was for charity," said Sandy Arkell, Johnathan's mother.. "I'm very mindful of the fact that we are very fortunate in these difficult times. ... It's hard to imagine what it's like to have a sick child."

The Ronald McDonald Family Room provides parents a place to rest while their children are hospitalized. It's the first such facility in Illinois to be a part of the hospital, not a separate building.

Since the room opened at the end of March, 450 families have used it to relax in the den area, eat in the kitchen, shower in private bathrooms, or bring their other children to play with their hospitalized siblings in the playrooms. There also are two private sleeping rooms.

"It gives families a place to relax and take care of themselves, too," said Katie Allabough, Family Room director.

Chris Donatelli, of Wheaton-based Donatelli Builders, said he saw an ad for the benefit a few days before it took place last spring. Three family members, including a then-8-year-old niece, and a friend had suffered from cancer and he'd learned what parents had to go through, he said.

He collaborated with his colleagues in the industry on concepts for a deluxe playhouse that would be built for the winning bidder at the Clubbin' for a Cause benefit, which raised more than \$200,000 for Ronald McDonald House Charities.

"I wanted to make difference in a different way," Donatelli said. But other than scale, the playhouse was designed and built in much the same way as his custom homes.

"We wanted it to be authentic. There were no corners cut," he said, adding that such a project for somebody else would likely cost just about the winning bid of \$14,000.

Donatelli worked with Marshall Architects, American Gardens Landscaping and others to create the home.

The playhouse was certainly a "fun summer surprise" for Johnathan, but also much more, said Arkell, who's a member of the HWJC and was moved by hearing from representatives of Ronald McDonald House Charities.

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