



How Leah Shares Her Big Servant's Heart

By Gerry Justice



She is small in stature but big in heart.

Leah Shubert is her name. And in her 36 years of service at the Ronald McDonald House (RMH), she clocked 2,525 volunteer hours and was selected as the Lori Kleiman Volunteer of the Year in 1996.

In December 2018, Leah retired from the House, which sits on the north side of the IUPUI campus, just a short walk from Riley Hospital for Children at Indiana University Health. Her steps are smaller and more deliberate than when she began helping out here in 1982. Stairs pose a bit more of a challenge for her now than they once did. But laughter still comes easy for this pleasant 85-year-old great-grandmother.

She credits her Christian upbringing for her kind heart and eagerness to care for others. And though hers was a loving family of four – she had one sister – Leah admits they weren't close like some families.



Leah Shubert celebrating her favorite time of the year at the Ronald McDonald House.

Her mother took her to church when she was a child and showed her how to help others. Leah volunteered in the nursery and shared her voice with the choir. She attended Jefferson High School in Lafayette, and in 1950 Leah made the acquaintance of a young man named Glenn Shubert. "When I met him, I had two years of school left to go. So that was a good thing," Leah remembers. She graduated in 1952 and married Glenn in 1955.

The two moved to Indianapolis, where she found a part-time job at Indiana National Bank. Leaving her post at noon each workday left her afternoons wide open.

When the Ronald McDonald House was built in 1982, one of Leah's coworkers at the bank began volunteering at the House. "We were good friends. She said to me, 'Why don't you come with me and work at the Ronald McDonald House.' I said, 'Oh, I don't know.'"

Leah's caring instincts soon outweighed her hesitations, because she had the time. But perhaps, most of all, she felt the need to share it.

"I got to thinking about it, and reading about volunteering, and I thought it was a good thing," she says. "Because I think it's good for you. It improves your overall well-being; it boosts your mental and physical health and makes you happy. Volunteering helps keep you connected and make new friends."

Before her friend at the bank mentioned RMH, Leah had looked for a volunteer opportunity. But this one touched her heart, because of the personal comfort and care and hospitality that the House provides. An aspect that touched her the most was that RMH offers accommodations to families dealing with one of the most challenging situations parents can face — a seriously injured or ill child.

"Volunteering here lets you live your faith. I'm a Christian, and we are to be servants," Leah explains. "Mathew 25:40 says, 'Verily I say unto you, in as much as you have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, you have done it unto me.' That's why I became a volunteer."

During her initial visit, she met the House's first manager, who would bring her knitting out and visit with families. "I thought that was a good thing. It would make them feel at home here," says Leah.

So, she started out by signing up for the 3:30 to 6:30 evening shift every other week. And then after 19 years at her banking job, she retired. But not from the House.

In 1997, after retiring from a career in the printing industry, Leah's husband, Glenn, joined her at the House. "He came on board with me. We did a lot of things together," she recalls fondly. "Maybe one of the guests didn't have a car and needed a ride somewhere. Glenn took them. Or maybe they wanted to go to the grocery store or drugstore. Glenn was always there to help. I helped Glenn stock the laundry and the pantry. That was a good thing for him."

When Leah and Glenn traveled on vacations, they stopped at Ronald McDonald Houses in other states. They were amazed at how different some of the Houses were on the outside and so pleased at how they were all so welcoming on the inside.

One of the Houses was an actual home, she remembers. "It doesn't matter what the structure looks like, it's what's in your heart that matters," Leah says.

Glenn and Leah's steady and dependable commitment to the RMH led to the two becoming weekend managers every other month. There they met many new volunteers through the years, as well as recruited and mentored several of their close friends from church.



Glenn & Leah Shubert at a Ronald McDonald House outdoor event.

Glenn volunteered at the RMH for 12 years before being diagnosed with Myositis in 2002. Myositis is a rare chronic and progressive disease in which the muscle fibers and skin are inflamed and damaged, resulting in muscle weakness.

Leah changed her volunteer schedule to Saturdays to care for Glenn through the week. First, he walked with a cane, and then a walker before he eventually required a wheelchair. Then the disease robbed him of the joy of working at the House at all.

He died on May 20, 2017, following 62 years of wedded bliss with his wife and dedicated volunteer partner.

"I'm still sad, and I don't think that will ever go away," she says. "I really miss him, because he was such good helper," she says. "There's a wall of hearts at the RMH, recognizing donors and volunteers. We have one on there — Glenn and me."

Glenn's death was only one of Leah's many heartbreaks while volunteering at the House. After the unexpected and tragic death of their only son in 1999, she called on her support system to get through it. House managers and other volunteers gave all they had in compassion and understanding, which would later serve Leah well in her role at the House, offering the same to the families of ill and injured children.

Leah says her memories are many and have been both happy and sad over the years. "A young couple from North Carolina brought their seven-month-old baby to receive a cochlear implant," she explains. (A cochlear implant is a small, electronic device that can help provide a sense of sound to a person who is profoundly deaf or severely hard-of-hearing.) "That was pretty young for a cochlear implant. It was wonderful to learn that their son's procedure was a success and that his life and theirs would be different from that day forward. We got to be friends while she was here. They were wonderful people."

Unfortunately, some of the other less joyful memories linger with Leah as well. "I remember one time I was on duty in the afternoon, and a young lady lost her child. She was really sad and crying, so I went over to comfort her. We hugged and shed tears together," she says.

Some of the families have lived at the House nearly a year. As long as their child remains hospitalized, they have a place to stay. In addition to the main location on Limestone Street, the RMH also has a House within Riley Hospital, where families can shower, rest, and have a meal or snack.

Leah talks fondly of the many wonderful outreach programs in which volunteers can participate. Her favorite annual events were always the Holiday Open House and Santa's Workshop. The House is beautifully decorated, with wonderful means for the Houseguests. There is singing and other festivals. It is a time when there is a great spirit of peace, hope, and fun. The parents can visit Santa's Workshop — located inside the RMH — and select gifts from a room stuffed with games and toys, puzzles and figurines, dolls and blankets. Volunteers wait nearby to wrap the gifts. It is special to see the families as they enjoy a small part of the holidays.

"When Ronald McDonald came to the open houses, oh, to see those little children's faces smile. They would be at the front door waiting for him to arrive. Sometimes Ronald brought members of his church choir, and they sang carols. That was really nice," she says.

Leah remembers the pop tab campaigns fondly. People from all over save pop tabs year-round then donate them on Monument Circle every July in a drive that nets the House money from the recycled aluminum. She remembers volunteering at the coat check at the Fairgrounds, the Run for Ronald fundraisers and the time she helped sell T-shirts with professional stock car race driver Bill Elliott.

The common goal for all these activities remains the same now as it did when she signed up for her first shift: to serve the families.

Leah cherishes the friendships she made over the past 36 years with the staff, other volunteers and the families whose life stories have touched her heart. She still sings the praises of the many churches, businesses, and schools that prepared meals for the guests. To share the spirit of giving, Leah took her grandchildren to the House when Ronald arrived for special occasions. She thinks back on the many tours she conducted, proud of the House and extraordinary gift of love and hospitality the House provides.

In the last few years, Leah has mostly worked at the front desk, fielding calls and processing referrals, but also working in the library — her favorite room in the House. "I love books. I read a lot. I never keep track of the books I read, so sometimes I read the same book twice. I like mysteries. My favorite author is David Baldacci."

When asked if she ever wanted to stop volunteering at the RMH, Leah says, "No way, I loved it. I love the staff here. I am sad to leave but will also look back with warm affection on my volunteer experience with the RMH."

What's next for Leah, you may be wondering? "I will help my daughter baby sit the grandchildren and great-grandchildren," she says. "The world has changed. I really worry about my grandchildren, what kind of life they are going to have."

Leah has one daughter, four granddaughters, and three great-granddaughters. "I'll still meet friends at Crosspoint Baptist Church and encourage them to volunteer. It's a long distance to drive every Sunday, but you know when you make friends in a church...If I get bored at home, I'll volunteer at the library in New Palestine."

At the end of our visit, she asks, "Do you think I did a pretty good job?"

Perfect. Absolutely perfect.

"I like being a good servant," she says. "When the Lord meets me at the door and says, 'Well done my good and faithful servant,' that will be a good thing."