



ABOUT YOU

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Intriguing Women | Monster Bash | Finding Big Foot

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NO PLACE LIKE HOME

By DWAIN HEBDA // Photos Courtesy of KRISTIN TRULOCK

A young mother settles herself, leaning back in her chair. She rubs her eyes. Hospital rooms have become her world, its caregivers and the treatments they bear her life's pocket watch. She can almost tell the time of day by their coming and going.

She cleans offices for a living, has for years, just not for the last three weeks that have passed in this room. It's hard work done in the dead of night, a six-hour block cut out of every 24 like the mass they took from her right breast. It's taken some adjustment to function in daytime hours; hours spent being poked, radiated and dosed to root out any remaining rogue cancer cells.

She locks her fingers and stretches, trying not to think about her two children back home, restless in missing their mother, adding to the exhaustion her

husband feels after a 12-hour shift at the plant. She wants to see them, but more than that, she wants them to see her free from all of this – free from the oncological signature scrawled on her body. Healthy – as she was before the lump – with hair and color in her cheeks and with love handles.

It's late-autumn dark when her mother helps her into the car, a cheap import model that's seen four presidents. Belts squeal and the engine rattles under the cold hood, but it starts, and two dim headlights cut a short path through the moat of darkness. At a stoplight, the woman aims her heavy eyes through the windshield at a house across the street, glowing in the night. As she adjusts the scarf around her throat, a ragged breath comes out as a sigh. Almost home.

Kristin Trulock never fully knows what each day will hold, so she approaches each one expecting a miracle. As executive director of Home for Healing in Little Rock – a temporary home for people receiving cancer treatments and families with a child in the NICU at any of the city's hospitals – there is plenty challenges to her belief that today, wonder will triumph over sorrow and joy overshadow pain.

But you can't tell that to Trulock. Today, a scan will come back clean; today, a baby gets to go home; today, the medicine finally kicks in. She's certain of it, because she has to be. For the people staying at the home, today is everything, so she and the staff work to make it everything it can be.

"We pride ourselves on knowing all of the guests in our home – knowing about their families, knowing about their backgrounds, understanding what their barriers are," she says. "We help them break those barriers while they're here by helping them focus on what they have to focus on, and that's healing or staying strong for their babies or their loved ones.

"I've seen many who leave much more positive, with a better outlook on life, and that's because we stayed positive the entire time they were here. We held their hand the entire time. 'How is your day today? What can we do for you today? Do you need anything?'"

Since its opening in 2003, Home for Healing has undergone a couple of name changes and refined its mission to better find its spot among other resources available in Little Rock. In the last two years, Trulock has led efforts to better maximize the home's utilization.

"When I came on board two years ago, the home was not being fully utilized, so I did a community assessment to see who else needed these services," Trulock explains. "One thing we learned, was there's a large amount of teenage patients undergoing cancer treatment at Arkansas Children's Hospital, specifically those going through stem cell transplants. They are in the hospital for almost 100 days, and then when they come out, they have to stay close to the hospital for multiple months and check their blood levels every single day.

"At other facilities in our area, they either don't take teenagers or they don't allow them to stay that long without checking out and checking back in. At our facility, we allow them to stay as long as they need without checking out and checking back in, and we lowered our threshold to accept patients 13 years old and up."

As Trulock discovered other classifications of patients who were falling through the cracks, Home for Healing became the place that took them in.

"Other changes came about organically," Trulock says. "We had a cancer patient who was in ICU. He had brain cancer and when they were in the surgery, his skull collapsed because of the cancer and all the radiation. Most recently, the Arkansas Heart Hospital called us with a patient. It really has expanded our mission to keep our home full at all times with people in need.

"We used to say you had to live 50 miles away or more to stay here, and that's the way most of the lodging facilities still are. But we know there's a need among people from Jacksonville, Conway, Benton or Redfield, people who do not have the transportation to go back and forth or it's too hard on them with the cost of gas and everything else. So, we lifted that restriction. As long as patients have a need, we're here for them."



"We are passionate to support Home for Healing's mission to provide a peaceful home for so many in need."

The old man rises earlier than most of the people in the house, the byproduct of 80 years working the land of his father and grandfather. He dresses quickly, runs a comb through his mop of white hair and fluffs the beard that reaches the chest pockets of his overalls.

She looked better last night, he thinks, as he laces up his boots. Her color had returned and she had a little more of an appetite. The doctor says she's making progress, but hell, what does he know? He'll trust the knowledge gained through 60-plus years of marriage over some sawbones barely old enough to shave.

He's not a church-going man, at least not compared to some, but he catches himself whispering into thin air a lot lately. Sometimes it's bargaining, sometimes pleading, sometimes it's just what takes the place of the screaming he forces back into his chest – screaming at her pain, at helplessness, at the terror of losing her. Then, he remembers the conversation he had with the volunteer at dinner last night – the kindness of her voice, the encouragement that fed him as much as the meal. He reaches for his hat, heading back to the car and back to her side.

Richard and Brandy Harp said attending last year's event was so much fun, it inspired them to co-chair this year's Oct. 28 bash.



Brandy and Richard Harp



Jon Underhill Real Estate

In almost 20 years of operation, Home for Healing has stacked up some impressive credentials, welcoming 5,000 cancer patients, their caregivers and the parents of babies in the NICU to the 30-person occupancy home. Almost 700 babies have been born to parents in that time, including 59 sets of twins and 9 sets of triplets.

Each year, the point of origin for guests is split nearly 50/50 between Arkansans and those from elsewhere – patients who've come from 35 states and seven foreign countries, as far away as Bangladesh and Nepal.

Not surprisingly, all of this doesn't come cheap, which is what makes the Monster Bash, Home for Healing's annual benefit costume party, so vital to the organization's ability to provide services.

Richard and Brandy Harp said attending last year's event was so much fun, it inspired them to co-chair this year's Oct. 28 bash, with the goal of raising \$300,000.

"We are thankful for all the sponsors, local businesses, friends and family that will help us achieve our goal," Brandy said. "We are passionate to support Home for Healing's mission to provide a peaceful home for so many in need. After attending this event last year, this is our favorite nonprofit fundraiser we have ever attended."

The event will feature live and silent auction items, delicious food, creative cocktails and live entertainment. Individual tickets, limited to 500, are \$100, and a table of eight is \$800. Attire is come-as-you-are, but longtimers know to dress up in their best Halloween costume duds.

Also featured during the event, the presenting sponsor of which is Jon Underhill Real Estate, is the presentation of two awards. The Heart of the Home Award will be presented to interior designer Larry West Jr., and the Community Impact Award will be presented to Gary Dean, the architect who designed the house.

Richard Harp said in addition to promoting a fun evening, he's relishing the opportunity to spread the mission of the organization to people who are unaware of what it does.

"We've found several folks who did not know what the organization was, didn't understand its purpose," he says. "It wasn't that long ago I was in that same boat. In fact, it wasn't until I went to Monster Bash last year that I learned it's a great cause. We've done some education and in the vast majority of cases, people say, 'Oh my gosh! I didn't imagine that even existed.'"

When asked what it was about Home for Healing that stood out from the city's many other worthy causes, Brandy says seeing the home in action compelled them to get involved.

"It's so hard to put into words, but if you walk inside this home and you spend one hour there, it's going to change your whole perspective," she says. "It's the most amazing thing. You come in and yes, we all live busy lives and yes, there's a lot that comes with that. But here, there are people who are really worthy of positive encouragement and support, who are going through one of the hardest times of their entire life, fight-



ing significant health issues. "Home is the most important place on earth to feel safety, love and to come spend time together as a family. We want to shine a bright light on that and help provide that kind of home for those who need it most."

After 11 weeks, Baby Logan is finally going home. The tough little preemie has seen more than his share of doctors and nurses during his short life, starting just minutes after birth when

delivery nurses noticed something wrong with his heartbeat. Surgery soon followed, to the horror of his parents.

Logan is the couple's first child, and nothing could really prepare them for everything a baby brings, much less one so small he's dwarfed by the teddy bear his Nana and Papa gave him. Days folded into weeks of staring through a clear plastic bassinet. Neither got the blessing of holding him at first – he was too sick and frail for that – so they settled for nudging his tiny palm with their fingers. On the day he finally squeezed back, they wept.

Every evening, they returned to their room at the house, amazed at how exhausting a day of sitting in a chair or pacing a hallway could be. It's just one of the things they found in common with the other parents of other babies in similar circumstances here. They've become each other's mooring point in good days and bad, sometimes sobbing under the weight of it all, other times high-fiving over good news. If they are honest, they envied the ones who got to go home, but they also drew strength from them; strength that let them get up, go back to the hospital and do everything all over again.

*But, not today. Today, they hold their breath through discharge paperwork and final instructions, half expecting something to derail at the last possible second. When they step into the bright afternoon sunshine, they breathe new air and cast one last look at the house that has embraced them for so long. A key turns and the car seems to know the way home. Today, the miracle is theirs. **BY***

2022 Monster Bash
Friday, Oct. 28; 7:30-11 p.m.

The Venue at Westwind,
7318 Windsong Drive, North Little Rock

homeforhealing.org/about/#events