

Rest for the weary

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Six years ago, Smith River auto mechanic Walter Richards was working on an old Scout SUV when a backfiring engine sparked an explosion. It was like a flamethrower, and it threw Walter backwards, engulfing his upper body in fire.

Walter rolled on the ground, trying in vain to get out of his new flannel shirt. Instead, it burned off. Walter suffered second- and third-degree burns to his right arm, chest, stomach, back, neck and face.

From Sutter Coast Hospital he was flown to the burn unit at UC Davis Medical Center in Sacramento.

Because of his age and his health — he had emphysema — the doctors didn't even expect him to make it through the night.

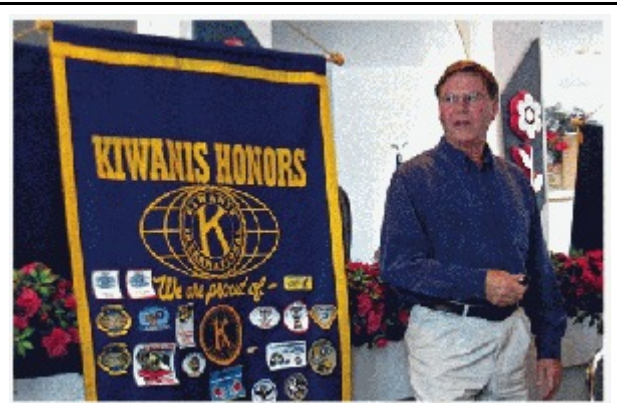
But Walter made it through the night, and then the next. He endured a nine-hour skin-graft surgery, a two-week induced coma, and he remained at the hospital for another six weeks while he recovered.

After the accident, Walter's wife, LaDonna Richards, traveled to Sacramento to be with him.

The first night she stayed in a motel for \$60. But LaDonna knew that she couldn't afford that for long.

"I was thinking there is no way I can do this every night. I thought I'll just have to sleep in my car or the waiting room. I don't know what I would have done as far as washing my hair and stuff," LaDonna says.

It's a problem faced by many families of patients at UC Davis Medical Center, a major regional hospital that takes in severe medical cases from throughout Northern California. Home is hours away, yet motels may be prohibitively expensive for longterm stays, especially as medical bills pile up.



[Click this picture to view a larger image.](#)

Gary Christensen, developmental director for Kiwanis Family House (bottom), thanked Kiwanis Club of Crescent City on Wednesday and presented an award to its secretary, Pastor Carol Layton, for raising funds to support the house, which takes in relatives of UC Davis Medical Center patients. LaDonna Richards stayed there when her husband, Walter Richards, was a patient.

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After LaDonna's first night in the motel, a hospital social worker asked about her sleeping arrangements and found her a place to stay.

The Kiwanis Family House is a residential facility on the hospital's campus that gives marooned families a place to stay while a loved one is treated, which may take months.

In its 24 years of operation, the house has accommodated more than 13,000 families, including 78 from Crescent City and 19 from Smith River. In 2007 it took in 26 families from Del Norte County. Remarkably, Crescent City ranked 10th on a list cities families originate from, beating out many places significantly larger in population.

For 22 of its years, the house was small, with just 13 bedrooms and shared bathrooms. Many families were turned away.

But in 2006, Kiwanis International closed the old house and opened a new \$4.2 million building on property donated by the hospital.

With 32 bedrooms and 7 RV spaces with full hookups, the house is able to help many more families in need.

Each bedroom has its own bathroom, TV and DVD player. There are courtyards, a fenced playground, an indoor playroom and large communal kitchens with multiple refrigerators and cupboards for each family to store groceries.

Families pay anywhere from \$40 to nothing per night, according to their ability.

In LaDonna's case, her co-workers at the Security Housing Unit at Pelican Bay State Prison raised \$700 that she used to pay for groceries (the hospital cafeteria is not cheap, LaDonna says) and \$10 a night for her room.

The house's directors, Sacramento-area Kiwanians, continually solicit funds from Northern California Kiwanis clubs, and they have a "Sponsor a Family for a Night" program that seeks donations in \$40 increments.

On Wednesday, the house's developmental director, Gary Christensen, was in town to recognize the fundraising efforts of the Kiwanis Club of Crescent City and present an award to the club's secretary, Pastor Carol Layton, for her part.

For the past three years, the Kiwanis Club has held a rummage sale in February that raises about \$1,000 for the house each time. The club has also purchased memorial bricks in the house's courtyards, and several club members help sponsor the family-for-a-night program.

"That's the reason I'm in Kiwanis," says Layton. "The whole business is to serve our fellow human beings."

As pastor of Crescent City United Methodist Church, Layton is sometimes called to Sutter Coast Hospital to minister to families in times of medical emergency. She's seen sick and injured Del Norters put on helicopters bound for UC Davis Medical Center.

"I know what it looks like on both ends of the story. I know what it's like to land in the hospital in a strange town. To know the house is there, when families are down there in the absolutely worst set of circumstances, it makes me feel really good to know that our citizens have stepped up.

"It's one of those things most people never think about until they need it," Layton says.

The house becomes more than just somewhere to sleep and eat. For LaDonna, it was a place to find solace in the company of others who shared her pain.

"All of those people that stay there, even though they come and go, they feel like a family," she says.

In particular, LaDonna remembers a Palo Alto woman whose husband lost sections of both arms to amputation after he was nearly electrocuted while working near a power line.

"Even through all the pain my husband was going through, he felt even worse for this other guy because he was out for quite a while and Walter worried how he was going to take the news when he came out of his induced coma," LaDonna remembers.

When she came back to the house at the end of each day, it was not unusual to find the Palo Alto friend in the kitchen sharing her Samoan cooking with anyone who was around.

"Even though it was a horrible time, there are some fond memories of meeting so many different people at the house and praying for each other," LaDonna says.

After two months, Walter was discharged from the hospital, and together the couple reside in Smith River while LaDonna continues to work at the prison.

"We've been together for 37 years," she says. "He's been a part of my life for most of my life, and I just — oh, I don't know what I would have done if I couldn't have stayed down there with him."

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