



healthy outlook

Beth Harman
CEO Ronald McDonald House

Beth Harman is charming, calm and caring – one of those people you can’t help but warm to. When we meet, instead of getting straight down to business, she invites me to share morning tea with her and seven of her work colleagues first.

Around a large table, surrounded by computers and paperwork, we enjoy the largest date scones I’ve ever seen, as well as casual banter about rainy flower shows and U2. Then, Beth opens discussion about rather more serious healthcare topics.

Beth’s concerns are justified. After all, she is the CEO of Ronald McDonald House (RMH), which provides free shelter and support for families of sick children whose local regional hospital is not funded to provide the medical care they require. Set in the grounds of Auckland

Hospital, this 58-room establishment is one of 261 such service providers worldwide. It takes care of families from all over New Zealand who have to travel to seek specialist services such as heart surgery, neo-natal intensive care, transplants, oncology and immunology.

“What we actually do is provide a nurturing environment for parents who find themselves in the worst situation possible – not knowing whether their child has a life-threatening condition,” she says. “Starship and National Women’s specialist paediatric services have

greatly improved the outcomes for children suffering life-threatening diseases or life-compromising illnesses. Although it is difficult, inconvenient and sometimes financially disabling to leave home, family and community, and come to Auckland, no parent would deny their child every chance for good health. Being here, for as long it takes, helps make that happen."

And how did Beth, an ex-Christchurch girl who has spent most of her working life in high-level jobs for advertising moguls including Colenso and Saatchi & Saatchi, get involved in this cause?

"I wanted to have more input in the products I was promoting," she says.

So, after the birth of her youngest child, Eloise, she decided to break out of the cycle and did an MBA. Not long after completing that, she took on a role as marketing and development manager at the Auckland Art Gallery.

"I just loved the balance between being involved in a building project, marketing the gallery and fundraising," she enthuses.

Then, after an unintended detour back into the advertising world, helping run an agency bought by her partner, Peter, Beth says the RMH role pretty much dropped into her lap. She found herself taking on a \$7.7 million project that involved everything from a building contract and major refurbishment to budgeting, organisational change and fundraising.

"But the skills I acquired while working at the gallery equipped me well for the new job," she says.

She admits, too, that she was definitely attracted to the role because of the adrenaline rush that comes with completing a mammoth project within a set timeframe, and based only on community support.

It also allowed her to indulge in her passion for design, using her flair to create an uplifting, comfortable environment for the resident families. The end result is welcoming and inviting; spacious, and featuring grey-hued quality furnishings with cheerful touches of red and orange – courtesy of Resene – as well as stunning vistas across the city and sea.


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"I wanted it to have a domestic feel, but it also needed to be practical and stay looking good for a few years," says Beth. "There is definitely a correlation between how well we look after this environment and how well the families here look after what we provide."

Beth's compassion and understanding is not surprising, seeing she is the mother of five children of her own. Her oldest sons, aged 34 and 22, live in Melbourne, while her third boy, a 19-year-old uni student, 17-year-old daughter and youngest daughter, aged 14, all live at home.

"And I have one grandchild, who is only four years younger than my youngest child," she grins proudly.

Besides having a bunch of offspring to organise, Beth says her challenge for the next year is to focus on fundraising and turning RMH into a completely self-funding operation, long term. And once that's done and dusted, she doesn't know what her next mission will be. **H**

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