



Sheila and Fred Baerenz joined hundreds at [A Celebration of Special Children](#) last May to celebrate the impact of Jill's House.

GIVING

Understanding typical sibling challenges and gratitude drive donor's faithful giving to Jill's House.

"My father was a career Air Force officer who did two tours in Vietnam," said Fred Baerenz. "When my dad was in Vietnam, my mom had to handle raising our family all alone. My brother, David, who was three years older than I, had Down syndrome and weak lungs. There was a constant battle with breathing challenges and oxygen deprivation."

Fred and his wife, Sheila, have been faithful supporters of Jill's House since the day our doors opened. As

the typical sibling of a brother with special needs, Fred knows firsthand the unique challenges families face when raising a child with an intellectual disability. "Giving to Jill's House honors my brother and my parents," said Fred. "Sheila and I want to do everything we can to bring even a moment of relief to these remarkable families. I have walked their walk. We know we can't change the world, but if we can make things just a little bit easier for even one family, we know God has been glorified."

Fred's mother had two children before Fred was born. Donna, a typical child, was the oldest, followed by David. When David was born, the children's father left. Fred's mom was blessed to marry again, and together they had Fred. "My dad married into the family knowing the special challenges ahead, but he not only fell in love with my mom, he fell in love with Donna and David, too."

In the midst of raising David, the family was faced with a tragic event. When Donna was 13 years old, she was involved in a horrific accident. Donna was riding a horse, lost control and was hit by a truck. The impact caused the saddle horn to drive into her liver. She had 18 major surgeries over the next 12 years, each one with low probability for survival. "During that time our family was often stretched between two hospitals," said Fred, "dealing with two sets of issues. I just did my best to stay quiet and not add any more pressure on my parents." In 1969, when Fred was just seven years old, David passed away from complications related to influenza. Donna battled her injuries for 12 years, succumbing to her injuries and dying in 1976 at the age of 25.

"Looking back, people have often commented on how hard it must have been," said Fred, "but to us it was just life. I look back on those days now, and I realize what a blessing something like Jill's House would have been to our family, especially my mom, not only for the rest she would have been given but for the staff and community of people who share the love of Jesus with families raising children with special needs."

Fred's mother loved the Lord, but when Fred's father was heading back to Vietnam for a second tour of duty, the pastor of their church stated that one could not serve in the U.S. Military and be a Christian. Just weeks before, an Air Force Chaplain tried to pressure his parents to commit David to



Fred, right, has many joyful childhood memories of growing up with David, who had Down syndrome and passed away at the age of 10.

an institution. "That was the day my mom stopped going to church," said Fred. That is, until she was diagnosed with cancer in 2000. "I gave her a cassette tape of Lon Solomon's sermon called 'The Power of Prayer' which was part of his Spiritual Boot Camp series," said Fred. "The message taught me how to pray boldly. I apologized to my mom, telling her that I had been praying feebly for her and that from that moment on I would pray for her full recovery. She had some setbacks with her radiation and chemotherapy not working, and it was the only time in my life when I saw her confidence in her faith challenged. But the tape on prayer totally revitalized her! Armed with her Bible and the Holy Spirit, she would go up and down the oncology ward at the hospital ministering to people."

The Christmas before Fred's mother passed away, while she was in hospice care, she came to McLean Bible Church dressed in her pajamas and in her wheelchair. She wanted to see her grandson, Joe, in one last Christmas musical. At the conclusion, she asked to go forward and have Lon pray over her, which he did. She also completed a visitor's card, indicating she wanted to join the church. "It had been 31 years since the day she was encouraged to put David in an institution, when she turned away from church," said Fred. "Although Mom's faith had always been strong, I knew that night at McLean Bible Church my mom had finally made peace with God's church."

Fred sees his brother in the faces of the children Jill's House serves. "Kids with Down syndrome have certain facial characteristics that are just so beautiful," said Fred. "They are full of joy. When I think of the perfect love of God, I think of my brother. It may be hard for some people to comprehend how good God really is, but for me it's easy. I just picture my brother's face, or the faces of the kids we serve, and I see Jesus in the flesh."

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