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Critically ill made to feel at home

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Sometimes inspiration is the result of pure serendipity. But executing your idea more often is the result of dedication, hard work and a determination to bring a good idea to fruition. Just ask Mark and Matthew Dumoff.

Out of boredom on a plane ride back from a skiing vacation four years ago, Mark Dumoff read an article in the airline magazine about two women in Michigan who had renovated the room of a young cancer patient who was recovering at home. He turned to his son and said, "You have to read this."

Matthew had been thinking about what he wanted to do as his bar mitzvah project, and by the time they got off the plane, he had decided. The Dumoffs would create their own charity to redo the bedrooms of critically ill children and young adults who were discharged from the hospital but needed to spend nearly all their time at

home. They called it Healing Spaces. Through an acquaintance, the Dumoffs were introduced to Dr. Michael Harris, director of the Tomorrows Children's Institute in Hackensack.

"It was Thanksgiving week of 2004, and Dr. Harris basically interviewed Matthew," Mark Dumoff said. "He said, 'I want to bring healing to the home, and I've been trying to figure this out for 30 years. You've brought me the answer, Matthew.' "I view the home as a place where healing must take place," Harris said. "The atmosphere within the home is very important."

"The second thing is there's no doubt the families get tremendous comfort from knowing that people are watching out for their children – total strangers," Harris said. "At a time when they are really down, it gives them faith in humanity."

Healing Spaces provides a complete makeover for the patient's room — repainting, redecorating, putting in new furniture, televisions, air conditioners — whatever is needed.

The Dumoffs won approval from the Internal Revenue Service for the charity's tax-exempt status in 2006, but didn't really get it going until well into last year. Since then, they have redone seven patients' rooms.

The charity has created a working relationship with Sharp Electronics in Mahwah, which supplies new televisions, air conditioners, air purifiers and other equipment. "We had heard about this program. It pulls at the heartstrings," said Andrew Kritzer, an associate vice president at Sharp who attended Healing Spaces' first annual golf outing and dinner earlier this month. "I had tears in my eyes listening to these kids talking about how this made their recovery a much easier process."

The charity's clients are referred from Hackensack University Medical Center and Saint Barnabas Medical Center in Livingston. They are interviewed first by social workers from the hospital, and then by a team from the charity.

"We ask the child what kinds of colors and themes they'd like, if they like sports or animals," said Matthew Dumoff, now 16. Then the charity puts the family up for a weekend in one of several hotels that donate their services, and a team sets to work on the room – and often other parts of the home.

Its most recent client was Richard Mohan, a 23-year-old from West Orange who's suffered from a brain tumor since he was 10. "It's amazing," said his mother, Kamlawattie Mohan. "The bed he had before had sharp edges, which we always had to pad with pillows and sheets. Because of the way he gets off his bed, we always had to worry about him hurting himself. Now he has a brand new padded bed."

Richard Mohan can't walk, moving around his second floor bedroom by dragging himself along the floor. "They put in a good padded rug to make it easier on him. His closet used to have everything piled on the floor because he couldn't reach the shelves. They moved the shelves around so he could reach them," his mother said.

Richard appreciates those changes, as he does the new air conditioner and television. A lifelong Giants fan, he's especially thankful for one other gift: "They gave me a jersey signed by Tiki Barber." But nothing compared with the most unexpected donation: a motorized wheelchair. "We live up on a hill, and with his tumor he shakes a lot," his mother said. "Now he has independence."

As for Matt Dumoff and Healing Spaces, she added, "For a kid to start something like this, he has to come from a good family. He has to have been taught good values." Aside from the \$4,000 to \$5,000 it spends to redo clients' rooms, its only other expense has come from running fund-raising events.