



DEDICATED: Nancy Blaik, left, and Lorraine Dickson, were the driving force behind Rachel House, which they started raising money for in 1991.

Picture: Esme Allen

Building Rachel House from nothing

SANDRA DICK

TWO women united by a cruel twist of fate sat in a New Town basement office and wondered what on earth they had got themselves into.

It was 1991, Nancy Blaik and Lorraine Dickson - mothers of two severely handicapped little boys, victims of extremely rare, terminal genetic conditions - were attempting what they jokingly called "mission impossible", trying to make their dream of a Scottish children's hospice come true.

But first they needed to raise at least £2 million - and that was just for starters. To make matters more difficult, they had no idea how on earth they were going to do it.

Today, Nancy and Lorraine laugh as they look back to the days when they naively stumbled into a mammoth fundraising effort.

This year, Rachel House, the hospice they helped create, marks ten remarkable years of helping ease the suffering of terminally-ill youngsters in their final days. And the movement they helped begin has spread - now there is a Robin House in Balloch and another Rachel House in Inverness.

But neither can hardly believe how it all began.

"It was an extraordinary experience to be a part of," reflects Nancy, who, at 69, blind and still caring for her desperately-ill son Daniel at home, continues to exude the energy and spirit that helped drive the hospice dream forward. We really had no idea what we were doing - but we were all determined to make this hospice happen."

Nancy had already witnessed the benefits of a children's hospice at Martin's Hospice in York, one of several English facilities aimed at easing the heartache that goes with having a terminally-ill child. Her son Daniel had suffered from a rare metabolic disease - Leigh's encephalopathy since his second birthday. With her own failing eyesight and the strain of constantly caring for a youngster unable to do even the simplest tasks for himself, the hospice was a Godsend.

By chance, Nancy's husband Jack, a respite care worker, mentioned Martin House to a health visitor he knew,

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Joyce McCluskey, who instantly thought of a Corstorphine family who might be interested.

Lorraine Dickson's young son Marc had been diagnosed with Hunter's syndrome, a terminal condition that was slowly robbing him of his mobility; Martin House could be the answer to her needs.

What happened next was a combination of luck, inspiration and sheer bloody-minded determination, which would eventually lead to Scotland's first children's hospice, Rachel House in Kinross.

Nancy sits in the living room of her home in Claremont Bank, Colinton, and remembers the chance meeting that kicked it all off. "I was manning a stall raising money for children with metabolic disorders in Portobello one day when Joyce happened to come past," she begins. "I wanted to know what Lorraine thought of Martin House, and Joyce said that she had thought it was wonderful.

"I said, 'you know, I think there are six or seven places like that in England but not one in Scotland, isn't that awful?' Joyce said we should have a meeting and try to find out more about it. And that was the start of it."

Despite both Lorraine and Nancy juggling desperately ill children, the women threw themselves into launching what would eventually become CHAS - the Children's Hospice Association Scotland.

"We booked a hall at Edinburgh University in November 1991 and were amazed when 80 people turned up," continues Nancy. "It was quite funny, because we knew we didn't have a hope in hell of raising £2m to build this place - never mind find the running costs. We really didn't know exactly how we were going to do it."

Lorraine agrees that the idea had quickly snowballed with hardly anyone involved having either the experience or knowledge of what to do next.

Yet somehow, the fundraising began to take shape. The women received the offer of six months rent-free in an office in St Colme Street and Nancy churned out letters pleading for financial help.

"I remember one of the first cheques arriving," says Lorraine, who now lives in Fife. "It was from a woman from the Women's Rural Institute in, I think, Corstorphine and it was for £50. I remember looking at it and thinking '£50! We need at least £250,000 to get going, what difference is £50 going to make?' But I soon realised that all those £50 and £10 cheques all added up."

The two women - often exhausted after sleepless nights tending to their sick sons - would work all day at their office. With Joyce appointed chairwoman and Nancy, with her natural talent for motivating others and public speaking, in the role of public relations officer, the fledgling charity hunted down support.

"It wasn't easy," stresses Nancy. "There were a lot of arguments and fights along the way - different people had different views on how we should do it. But then you would come in the next day and just get on with it, because we all knew that it was too important and mattered too much.

"For me, it was as if I had been taken over by something - I lived and breathed this idea - I was a woman on a mission," she adds.

THE turning point came when executives from the Royal Mail stumbled across the charity. "We were sitting in offices in Hanover Street in our coats because there was no heating," recalls Nancy. "The Royal Mail came along and asked how they could help. They put in heating, gave us equipment. They put us in touch with influential people and the next thing, everyone in Scotland seemed to be helping us."

Money flooded in - in particular a £2m donation from the McRobert Trust which helped turn the dream into a reality. Soon Nancy, Lorraine, Joyce and the other CHAS founders were scouring the Central Belt for a suitable location for the hospice.

Nancy recalls knowing instantly that the Kinross site that now houses Rachel House, was ideal. "There had been four years of us grinding away and suddenly it was happening," remembers Nancy. "We stepped through the gates and into this garden where there were trees and birdsong and it felt as if there was some kind of spirit there. It was absolutely right."

Since then, their vision has helped untold families. Morag Rhodes, CHAS' head of public relations, pays tribute to the "small band of hard working and dedicated volunteers" who began it all. "The fundraising appeal to build Rachel House touched the hearts of so many people in Scotland and beyond.

"The job is not over - our volunteers, some of whom are the original founders, and staff continue to work towards supporting the children and their families."

Sadly, Lorraine's son, Marc, died just as the fundraising effort was on the verge of reaching its peak. And there would be disappointment when the decision was taken not to name the hospital Marc Daniel House as they had originally hoped - it was named after the late daughter of a member of the McRobert family.

Neither Lorraine nor Nancy - who only retired from the CHAS board last year - felt any bitterness.

Instead, both are fiercely proud that their boys helped provide them with the inspiration to kick-start the hospice charity.

"Marc would have just celebrated his 29th birthday had he lived," says Lorraine. "He died in 1993, but I get up every morning and I can still see his face. Rachel House is my tribute to his life."

• *Donations can be sent to CHAS, Canal Court, 42 Craiglockhart Avenue, Edinburgh, EH14 1LT, or www.chas.org.uk*

Looking after nation's sick youngsters for ten years

RACHEL House opened its doors to Scotland's terminally-ill children on July 10, 1996 after a national fundraising campaign for CHAS which featured Wallyford youngster Suzanne Sutherland.

Suzanne, who died aged just seven from Krabbe's disease, an incurable degenerative disorder of the nervous system, became the first of more than 300 sick children to stay at the Kinross centre.

The campaign helped raise £10 million in just 30 months, enough to establish the hospice and pay initial running costs.

Today the hospice provides specialist respite care and emergency care for children with life-limiting, life-threatening and terminal conditions. It also offers short-term breaks for children and their families and bereavement counselling.

Last year 170 children and their families were helped by Rachel House and its team based in Inverness.

CHAS, based at Canal Court in Craiglockhart Avenue, continues to raise the £5m per year that is needed to operate the two Rachel Houses and Robin House.

The annual Rocking Horse Ball - which has raised more than £185,000 for CHAS since its launch in 1997 - will be held on May 20 at Prestonfield Hotel. Contact Gail Grant at gail@woodhouselee.com for details.

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