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## **NEIGHBORS EXTRA; Room to Heal cheers critically ill kids**

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b>Volunteers transform bedrooms into creative wonderlands

By VALERIE ZEHL

i>Press & Sun-Bulletin

VESTAL Poking around the Internet one day, Laurie Abess of Vestal found a site called SuiteDreamsProject.org.

It demonstrated how caring people in the Midwest pitched in **to** create healing environments for children with serious illnesses.

Perfect, she thought; exactly what her heart was already telling her **to** do. So, she and close friend Linda Salomons, whose son Eric endured a long battle with leukemia, started it locally.

First, Abess, who's a pharmaceutical representative for Johnson & Johnson, invited women with similar hearts **to** a holiday luncheon at the home she shares with husband, Ron, and their two young children.

About 30 women heard about the project that would be called **Room to Heal**, which aims **to** serve critically ill children of parents with limited resources by transforming the kids' bedrooms into creative wonderlands.

The event raised \$1,300, enough **to** fund the group's initial project.

Last month, a flock of volunteers swept into the Hardy home in Conklin.

There, they focused their time and talents on a bedroom shared by Austin, 8, and Joey, 5, two brothers who are dealing with leukemia and seizures caused by a brain mass, respectively.

Paint brushes in hand, Malaine Jackson of Vestal, along with friend Brookye Keeney of Apalachin, tackled one aspect of the transformation.

"They gave us an idea what the boys liked, and I went on the Internet **to** get photos," Jackson explains. They then proceeded **to** paint detailed renderings of fighter jets and a battleship on the bedroom walls.

Volunteers filled the **room**, working as though their actions had been choreographed.

Nancy Heichemer of Vestal and Yvonne Visram of Vestal primped and painted.

Gay Shaul of Johnson City topped the windows with cloud-covered cornices. Kim Myers couldn't be there in person, but she supplied cuddly, plush bedding.

"I have five children of my own, and I immediately could put myself in those parents' shoes," says Myers, of Vestal. "I personally was grateful for the opportunity **to** do something."

She called on a good friend, Steve Tokas, who's an electrician. Tokas, Lionel Louis and Ron Abess applied their skills. Ron had made a long countertop that would double as an aircraft carrier for the incoming (painted) jets. Strung with landing lights and equipped with an anchor, the steel-gray counter hides the drawers and doors that open **to** its storage areas.

"Ron probably spent 18 hours on that aircraft carrier," says Abess with a laugh. "We're going **to** have **to** rethink that for future projects."

A ceiling fan became the propeller of an aircraft in the newly colorful and cheery bedroom.

With carpeting donated by Endwell Rugs, a soothing white-noise machine, new television set, an efficient closet organizer and photos of many aircraft mounted in colorful frames and in a keepsake photo album, the **room** was completed.

But, the group realized, when Joey came down with the sniffles, he was quickly dispatched **to** sleep in another bedroom, that of older brother Shaun, 10, **to** avoid stressing Austin's fragile immune system.

So the group worked more magic in Shaun's **room**, texturing and perking up the walls with paint and adding a wallpaper border.

"When they walked into the **room**, they were flabbergasted," says Evelyn Hardy, the boys' mother.

Austin's favorite part is the aircraft carrier. "I felt really happy, and when I go into my **room** it makes me feel better," he says.

Joey likes the battleship and wants **to** thank everybody involved.

And those **rooms** are just the beginning, says Laurie Abess. She's on the lookout for future projects, as well as for donations.

Kim Myers plans **to** participate in every **room** transformation she can.

"I feel privileged **to** be part of it," she says. "It's all about everybody pooling their resources."

## **To Help**

If you are interested in submitting a name of a very sick child whose family lacks the economic resources **to** create a healing environment in their home, please

submit the name and phone number with a brief description of the situation **to** [labess@stny.rr.com](mailto:labess@stny.rr.com).

If you'd like **to** support the project, please send checks **to**:

**Room to Heal**

Partners Trust Bank

100 Rano Blvd.

Vestal, N.Y. 13850

And if you'd like **to** volunteer **to** help; donate furniture, materials and other supplies; or sponsor a **room**; contact Laurie at [labess@stny.rr.com](mailto:labess@stny.rr.com).

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