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Sedona philanthropist building camp for critically ill children

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A Sedona philanthropist is putting his heart and soul — as well as his money — into construction of a camp for seriously ill children.

Camp Soaring Eagle will cost Max James' family foundation about \$40 million to develop on 55 acres in Sedona. It will include climate-controlled cabins, athletic fields, an equestrian center, a fishing pond, an indoor recreation center, an Olympic-size swimming pool, a cafeteria, a pharmacy and a medical center.

James said the camp will serve an estimated 300,000 children in the Southwestern U.S., including 123,000 from Arizona. It is expected to open in June 2009.

Phoenix Children's Hospital operates a similar facility in Prescott, serving about 125 patients with cancer and blood disorders each summer. Founded in 1985, Camp Rainbow is held every year at the Friendly Pines Camp in Prescott. The facility is accredited by the American Camping Association.

Parents are not allowed to stay at either summer camp, so they put the lives of their chronically ill children in the hands of volunteer doctors, nurses and staff. During the rest of the year, however, both facilities will offer family events.

James is applying for membership in the Association of Hole in the Wall Camps, a national network of camps focusing on safety and programming for sick children. Thirteen camps operate under the Hole in the Wall banner around the world, including seven in the U.S.

Jessica DeLeonard, 29, attended the original Hole in the Wall Camp in Connecticut as a child while battling leukemia. She knows first-hand the impact Camp Soaring Eagle could have on children in the Southwest. The Sedona resident said she looks forward to volunteering at the new camp.

Her mother, Dorothy O'Brien, said it was difficult to let her daughter attend camp alone. She worried initially that the staff wouldn't know how to handle her daughter's illness.

"There's so much love and confidence and competence," O'Brien said. "These are people who know what your kid is going through. They know what to look for."

The pharmacy and medical center are nothing like those at regular camps, James said.

"Usually, it's a small office where a nurse might dispense meds once or twice a day," James said. But Camp Soaring Eagle will have a medical director, a nursing director, and doctors and nurses who specialize in the illnesses of the campers of the week. One



PROVIDED BY CAMP SOARING EAGLE

Construction is under way on Camp Soaring Eagle in Sedona, funded by philanthropist Max James.

week, for example, the camp will host kids with cancer who need chemotherapy during that period.

It will cost about \$5 million to run the facility each year — even with 1,600 volunteers, he said. It will be free for the campers, with fundraising efforts beginning soon to cover their costs.

"The special part about Camp Soaring Eagle is that it is a fully functioning medical facility disguised as a special camp," James said.