

New film tells story of Audrey Evans, Episcopalian doctor who co-founded Ronald McDonald House

by [Shireen Korkzan](#)

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Audrey Evans, center, poses with students at St. James School in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. (Photo courtesy of David Kasievich)

[*Audrey's Children*](#), a feature-length biopic about Audrey Evans, a pioneering British American pediatric oncologist and a devout Episcopalian who co-founded [Ronald McDonald House Charities](#) with members of the Philadelphia Eagles and McDonald's, will have a limited theatrical release beginning March 28.

Natalie Dormer—best known for her roles in *Game of Thrones* and *The Hunger Games: Mockingjay Parts 1 and 2*—stars as Evans, the first female chief of oncology at the Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and one of the first doctors to treat pediatric cancers with chemotherapy.

Directed by Ami Canaan Mann, *Audrey’s Children* highlights Evans’s myriad accomplishments in the 1970s while battling sexism and medical conventions of the time. Julia Fisher Farbman, a close friend of Evans, wrote the script and produced the film.

“There are so many things that happen in the movie that I remember Audrey telling us that happened. . . . Natalie [Dormer] did such a great job showcasing the persistence and also the pain in Audrey’s life, too,” said David Kasievich, president and head of school at St. James School, a tuition-free Episcopal school for children grades 4 through 8 in Philadelphia.

Not long after she retired in 2009 from the Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia, Evans co-founded [St. James School](#).

“Being a woman—being in a very male-dominated role—Audrey hit so many roadblocks and legal issues,” said Kasievich, who watched an early screening of the movie. “You’re going to see some things in this movie, and you’re going to say, ‘Whoa.’ This woman defied all the resistance.”

Born in York, England, in 1925, [Evans](#) was the only female student at the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh in Scotland and the only woman in her residency program at the Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh in the early 1950s. In 1953, she earned a Fulbright Fellowship and moved to Massachusetts to train at Boston Children’s Hospital for two years. Evans completed her medical training at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Maryland, in 1955. She briefly moved back to England to practice pediatrics but returned to the United States after learning that the field was closed to women in her home country.

After working in pediatric oncology in Boston and Chicago, Evans was recruited to create a pediatric oncology unit at CHOP, where she spent the rest of her medical career.

In 1971, she developed the [Evans Staging System](#) for neuroblastoma—a cancer that starts in neuroblast cells and mostly affects infants and young children—to help

determine disease progression and treatment efficacy. The system helped cut the mortality rate in half, and today, the [survival rate](#) is 90-95 percent.

While serving as chief of oncology, Evans noticed that many out-of-town families of children receiving treatment at CHOP had no place, or no affordable place to stay in the city. In the early 1970s, she met Jim Murray, then-general manager of the Philadelphia Eagles, when the NFL team raised and donated \$100,000 to the hospital for children with cancer in honor of a leukemia patient, [Kim Hill](#)—the daughter of Fred Hill, a tight end and wide receiver.

After Evans proposed free housing for families of children treated at CHOP, Murray reached out to Ed Rensi, McDonald's regional manager, for a donation toward purchasing a house. Rensi said yes and that he would donate proceeds from sales of the seasonal Shamrock Shake toward the house if it would be [named](#) the Ronald McDonald House, after the fast-food chain's clown mascot.

The first Ronald McDonald House—founded by Evans, Murray, Fred Hill, Philadelphia Eagles owner Leonard Tose, and McDonald's—opened in [1974](#) in Philadelphia. An independent nonprofit, Ronald McDonald House Charities is [headquartered](#) in Oak Brook, Illinois, a suburb of Chicago, where the [McDonald's Corporation](#) is based.

Today, it [operates](#) more than 387 houses in 62 countries, all located minutes away from special care hospitals. It provides at least 2.7 million overnight stays annually. In 2023, families saved \$736 million in lodging and meal expenses. The charity also provides free home-cooked meals and holistic services to families, an additional service that Evans encouraged.

Ronald McDonald House Charities also operates more than 271 “family rooms” inside hospitals in 28 countries, which allow families to rest while staying beside their sick children. The family rooms provide free snacks and toys, as well as a private place to shower and take a nap. Additionally, Ronald McDonald House Charities operates 41 “care mobiles” in 10 countries that provide free, on-the-spot health and dental care to families in need.

“[Evans] was pushing the medical research world to be open to trying these new techniques to treat cancer while also pushing the CHOP to think more holistically about how their patients and their families needed to be treated, and all those efforts eventually led her to connect with the right people and found the Ronald McDonald House,” said Kevin Todd, director of operations and strategic initiatives at

St. James School.

Evans, a parishioner of St. [Mark's Episcopal Church in Philadelphia](#), never had children of her own, but she was involved with St. James School until a few years before she died. She joined the students for lunch every week and got to know them on a personal level.

“It was always about more than just treating the child. It was about treating everything around the child so that the child could get as much support as they needed,” Todd said. “With that model, that whole ethos really was formative to how St. James was developed.”

Evans's presence at St. James School impacted many students and alumni, including 2019 valedictorian Ainyae Holmes, who was inspired by her to work in the medical field. Holmes, who works as a clinical research assistant at a gastroenterologist office in Chevy Chase, Maryland, is now applying to physician assistant programs.

“My relationship with Dr. Evans was a great one. We had lunch one-on-one one time, and she listened as I told her I wanted to study medicine in college, and she made me feel that I was definitely on the right path,” she said.

“Looking back, wow, I didn't realize in middle school that I was with a pioneer—this amazing, intelligent woman who was passionate about helping people in general, not just in medicine. She was someone who always wanted to give back to the community and advocate for everyone.”

Dormer told the hosts of *The View* television program in a March 27 interview that she “could not fathom that [Evans] wasn't a household name.”

“[Audrey's Children] is just the most amazing tale of the most incredible woman—pioneering, determined woman,” said Dormer, who met Evans before filming commenced. Evans [died](#) two weeks into filming in 2022 at age 97.

“[Evans] was one of those great Americans who dedicated her life to giving hope and comfort to families. She didn't just sit back; she saw the pain—the need—and she stepped into it,” said Daniel Gutiérrez, bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Pennsylvania, in a phone interview. “She was extraordinary in every way that it's hard even to encapsulate the profound impact she made on the world.”

“To know Audrey Evans—her study and her advancements in medicine, especially pediatric oncology—it’s indescribable. She was a faithful Episcopalian who cared so much and who did so much. Audrey lived a life of love as a true Christian servant, living in and caring for the community,” he added. —Episcopal News Service