

Julia's Butterfly Foundation: A Circle of Friends

In 2005, Maureen Bommer of Midland Park was fighting the insurance system for her daughter Julia, who suffered from Cerebral Palsy and a rare kidney disorder. Medicaid had cut Julia's in-home nursing hours by 30%, and Maureen was unable to get help from other sources to pay for the services. The gap would surely be a drain on the family finances. In that moment, Maureen realized there were other families facing the same tough situations, and never one to run from a fight, she vowed to take up their collective cause.

Shortly after that battle began, Julia took a turn for the worse and passed away the day after Mother's Day, 2005, one week shy of her 7th birthday. In lieu of flowers, Maureen and her husband, Stephen, asked family and friends to donate to a foundation they would start in Julia's name to help other families caring for chronically and terminally ill children. Little did Maureen know that her idea would metamorphose into a thriving Bergen County charitable organization known as Julia's Butterfly Foundation.

Adding to the family's unthinkable tragedy, just five months after Julia's death, Maureen, 42, who had been diagnosed with Stage IV cancer earlier that year, succumbed to the disease, leaving behind Stephen and four other young children, ranging in age from 9 to 2. Also grieving was an army of close friends who rallied to take up Maureen's mission.

"We were all devastated," says Christine Callahan-Rasnake, president of the foundation. "It all happened so fast; we didn't know what to do. We just knew we wanted to breathe life into Maureen's legacy." Theirs was a friendship that had begun with volunteerism many years before, having met on a committee of the Junior League of Bergen County, planning their annual fundraiser, Festival of Trees.

"Maureen always said, 'If you can help someone else, you should, because there is always someone out there who has it worse than you. It's the right thing to do,'" continues Callahan-Rasnake, a Wyckoff resident.

With these inspiring and generous words in mind, a core group of Maureen's friends gathered around the Bommers' kitchen table, and along with Stephen, began to flesh out a plan. "I remember that first time we got together," relates Carol-Jeannette Jorgensen, vice president of the foundation. "It was bloody awful, but we knew this is what Maureen would want us to do, and what we'd all be doing if she was alive any-



way. Maureen would have had us help her reach her goal." That evening, a plan was set forth, a mission statement was fleshed out, paperwork to become a 501 (c) 3 charitable organization was started and plans were underway for a fundraiser—The Butterfly Ball, which is now an annual event that's held every November.

"We all originally met planning a fundraiser, so the idea for a ball wasn't so far off base. This is what we know how to do and we do it well," says Ho-Ho-Kus resident Denise Mitchell, treasurer of the foundation. The idea for the organization's "Butterfly" theme was a natural one, given Julia's

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Julia's Butterfly Foundation, Inc. is a volunteer, non-profit 501 (c) 3 charitable organization dedicated to improving the lives of terminally and chronically ill children and their families. The foundation honors the memory of six-year-old Julia Marie Bommer, who passed away in 2005 following her brave battle against a rare kidney disorder. It is the foundation's goal to pay tribute to the life of this amazing child by helping other children and their families struggling with the demands of their unique circumstances. We are humbled by the courage and dedication of the children and caregivers we support, and consider it a privilege to provide financial aid, physical assistance and services to those who need it most.



involvement with the Butterflies Program at Valley Home Care, Inc. in Paramus, which provides palliative care to terminally and chronically ill children. Additionally, with the widely held belief that the butterfly symbolizes rebirth and tangible proof of a soul living on, Julia's life-affirming memorial service featured a child-friendly butterfly theme, including the release of live "Julia" Butterflies. The foundation's logo features the Julia Butterfly in the logo.

"The first Butterfly Ball was successful beyond our imagination," says Callahan-Rasnake. "We planned the event in about five months and raised over \$60,000.

"Being part of such a great foundation that helps children and families in times of crisis and tragedy is extremely gratifying," notes Glen Rock resident Irene Pensec, a foundation trustee. "We relieve some of the family's worries, whether financially or by providing them with the necessities that they need, and are able to give [the children] a better quality of life, usually at the end of their lives."

Several of the children that the foundation has helped over the years have passed away. "The work we do isn't glamorous by any means," emphasizes Mitchell, who notes that last year alone, the foundation helped several families by paying for their children's funerals. "It's important work, not glamorous work."

Morgan Borin, a trustee from Mountain Lakes, adds, "I never feel that I can do enough to help these families. It makes me feel so good to know we are helping people who so desperately need help."

Yet not all the stories have tragic endings. When 10-year-old Katie of Waldwick outgrew her wheelchair a few years ago, she gifted it to another child in need named Julia. Fast forward four years later when Mitchell read in a local paper about Katie's need for a handicap accessible bathroom and con-

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Area golf fans can swing into action for Julia's Butterfly Foundation, Inc. by supporting the upcoming PGA TOUR event, The Barclays, to be held at the Ridgewood Country Club in Paramus, August 24-29, 2010. By visiting www.buytfc.com, you can purchase discounted tickets to the tournament through the TICKETS Fore CHARITY program. Make sure to enter the appropriate promotional code and Julia's Butterfly Foundation will receive 75% of your purchase. For further questions, contact 201-675-9961, log onto www.juliasbutterflyfoundation.org, or email at info@juliasbutterflyfoundation.org.

tacted the family. When Mitchell mentioned Julia Bommer's name to Katie's mom, she immediately recognized Julia as the girl they had gifted the wheelchair to years before, and told a stunned

Mitchell of the past connection between the two girls. "I got the chills," Mitchell recalls. "I just knew we had to help this family. It was as if Julia guided us to this little girl."

Now in its fifth year, the foundation has been able to provide more than \$135,000 in assistance with over 50 grants to children and their families. The foundation has provided assistance for van lifts, modified furniture, wheelchair lifts, gait trainers, leg braces, therasuit therapy and modified bicycles, in addition to assistance with monthly expenses such as food, rent, and car and utilities payments. The foundation has also brought Christmas wish list gifts to children in the local hospitals and provided food gift cards to some of their neediest families around the holidays. By aligning with Valley Hospital in Ridgewood, St. Joseph's in Paterson and Hackensack University Medical Center in Hackensack, among other agencies, the foundation has been able to identify the families in greatest need of assistance.

"We have been able to help, in both big and small ways. When you see a mother

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light up and be so thankful for the little things you do, you are truly humbled and blessed to be able to help,” says Executive Board Member Michelle Alexander of Franklin Lakes, referring to Maddox, a child the foundation recently helped.

In her thank-you letter to the committee, Maddox’s mom, Ava, wrote: *“Maddox received his walker and the first time he got in it, he was scooting around! It is truly a blessing!”*

Another mom shared: *“Thank you for making the wheelchair lift a reality! It has helped me more than you would ever know. I am grateful forever.”*

No donation is too large or too small. With a minimal operating budget, all monies raised directly benefit the families. There is no overhead, just a group of volunteers with a PO Box, some stamps and a company sponsor, Jorgensen and Company, that allows the foundation use of its office as

needed. Wyckoff resident Catherine Brefach Newman, a board member and registered nurse, notes, “Our grass roots philosophy of quiet philanthropy does a worthy job of helping others’ lives on a daily basis, without the fanfare.”

In each of the past four years, Julia’s Butterfly Foundation has doubled the amount of giving from the prior year, showing there is an increased need for its services. In these tough economic times, other organizations that the hospital social workers rely on for assistance are running out of funds, making the foundation’s work all the more vital in the community.

The board members all agree that the best thanks by far is the praise they’ve received from one of Maureen’s sisters, Mary Taylor, who expressed the following sentiment: *“Maureen would be so proud of each of you! Your personal commitment to see this project through is*

heartwarming... I think you absolutely succeeded in doing what Maureen had envisioned when she set up the foundation. You’ve made a meaningful change in the lives of children and their families... When everyone else said ‘no,’ they found their way to you and you said ‘yes’... Maureen used to always say, ‘I wish I could catch a break.’ I think you’ve been able to provide that break to well-deserving children and their families. Julia’s legacy lives on in your valuable work.”

For members of the committee, the work is simply about keeping a promise to a friend. “What started out as a small effort in honor of a friend and her daughter has turned into a thriving foundation,” says Callahan-Rasnake. “We are proud of the work we are doing, as we are not only fulfilling a need in the community, but we also are fulfilling our dear friend Maureen’s dream, one child at a time.”

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