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Memorial charities give solace, purpose to grieving families

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Alex Handy



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By Scott O'Connell/Daily News staff GateHouse News Service

Posted Apr 25, 2011 @ 12:01 AM

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When former Milford High School football coach Dick Corbin was killed in a car accident last October, his family was too distraught to think about things like starting a charity in his memory.

But months later, after friends and co-workers began donating money to what would become the Richard C. Corbin Memorial Scholarship for student-athletes, the idea made perfect sense, said Corbin's wife, Ruth Ann Corbin.

"This was his true love - the student-athlete," she said, "He would be very proud of this."

In often tragic circumstances, memorial foundations give grieving families an outlet into which they can pour their time and resources, maintain a bond with their lost loved one, and in some cases attempt to help others avoid a similar fate.

But these charities, many of which carry significant financial and legal responsibilities, have forced some founders in MetroWest to reconsider the scope of their original intent.

Richard Handy of Medway said the foundation he and his wife started in memory of their son, Alex, who was killed in a bike accident five years ago, has since taken on a life of its own.

"This would have been Alex's senior year, and we thought maybe we should stop it right here," he said. "But it's become more than that. People count on us."

The Alexander Handy Memorial & Scholarship Foundation, which has nine board members and nearly \$25,000 in the bank, provides many benefits for Medway students, including high school scholarships, class rings, stipends for extended school gym hours, and safety education programs.

The Murphy Sisters Foundation in Needham, founded in honor of Shauna and Meghan Murphy, Algonquin High students who died in a car crash in 2005, maintains a similarly varied list of causes, especially safe driving for teenagers.

Like Handy, Chris Murphy, Shauna and Meghan's father, said the foundation has evolved over time.

"You're in a state of shock the first year. You just try to stay busy," he said. But after four or five years, Murphy said, "you start to think of what else you can do."

Murphy said the foundation is now considering a partnership with Be Like Brit, a memorial charity started by the family of Britney Gengel, a 19-year-old student from Rutland killed in last year's Haiti earthquake.

The organization is raising money to build an orphanage for Haitian children. "We want to try to make a difference in the world," said Murphy. "We've heard from the (local) students that everything we've been doing has been helpful. But there are so many other causes that could change the world."

It's not easy to keep a memorial foundation going, however, said Stephen LeDuc, a member of the committee that ran the Arthur Lambert Memorial 3-on-3 Basketball Tournament, named for the lifelong Marlborough resident who died in a car accident in 2000. The tournament ended its 10-year run last month.

"We wanted to do justice to the memory of Arthur," said LeDuc, who said the tournament's founders had agreed from the beginning to run it for a decade. "It requires a lot of effort, and you don't really want to see diminished interest."

Like many foundations, LeDuc said the Lambert tournament organizers struggled with asking for contributions, even though many people were happy to oblige. An effective charity needs to be organized, have people willing to donate time, and, perhaps most importantly, memorialize a person whose legacy can galvanize a community, he said.

"If the person is worthy, people will always come together to cherish that memory," LeDuc said.

That outpouring of support can create a dilemma for some families, said Charlene Larracey, whose son, Joey, a student and football player at Holliston High School, died of a heart condition three years ago. The annual basketball and football tournaments that Joey's classmates have run in his honor helped the family survive a difficult period, she said. But now the family must decide whether to end the tradition next year, as the Larraceys originally planned, or keep it going.

"It's kind of a double-edged sword," she said, calling the tribute to her son "bittersweet."

But along with sadness comes "overwhelming" gratitude to the students who refuse to let Joey's legacy fade, Larracey said.

"My biggest fear is that Joey would be forgotten, but these kids have shown that's just not going to happen," she said. "There aren't enough words to describe what they've done to help us."

Ultimately, that desire to remember a life is what drives most families to confront their grief and start a charity, even if the long-term plan isn't there yet.

"This is all new for us - we haven't even started any fundraising yet," said Corbin, who said her husband's scholarship has been funded by private donations so far. "It's been so difficult for us to adjust to the fact that he was killed."

It doesn't take long for new charities to form. Already, a foundation is being started for Framingham's Doug Bolanes Jr., a mixed martial arts fighter killed in a car accident last month. The family could not be reached for comment last week, but a website with the address douglasbolanesjr.org said an organization has been founded in his memory that will support MMA athletes, the sport, and the MMA community as a whole.

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