

Meghan

Continued from Page 1A

affects an estimated 250 to 500 children a year and is fatal in 20 to 40 percent of cases — and died just 5½ weeks later, leaving her grief-stricken family, friends and community struggling to deal with the devastating loss.

Thanks to her parents' establishment of the Meghan Rose Bradley Foundation and the efforts of a devoted community committed to never forgetting one of its brightest stars, however, Meghan's unwavering spirit and powerful legacy will live on and provide hope for other children diagnosed with pediatric brain cancer.

Devastating loss

"It happened so fast," said Ileen of the nightmare that began in late September 2004 when her daughter complained of stomach aches and fatigue.

When the symptoms worsened, the Bradleys brought Meghan to Somerset Medical Center in Somerville, where she underwent extensive testing.

"Later that night, a neurologist met with us privately and informed us that Meghan had a massive brain tumor," Ileen said of the frightening and unexpected news. "For Bob and I, it felt like the bottom had fallen out."

The following Monday, Meghan underwent a grueling 7½-hour brain surgery at NewYork-Presbyterian Hospital in New York City, and she and her parents began working on her recovery.

Through it all, Meghan remained committed to her family and friends and never put herself above others.

"That Oct. 21 — the same day that Meghan got her stitches removed and was mapped for radiation — it was our 20th wedding anniversary and I remember Meghan sitting in a wheelchair crying because she felt she'd ruined our special day," Ileen recalled.

"I told her that she couldn't have given us a better gift than by just being here."

After returning home, Meghan inspired all those around her by attending a team bonfire at her high school, where she was embraced by teachers, coaches and students.

Meghan's recovery unfortunately would be short-lived, however. Despite her medical team's best efforts, the spread of her cancer to her brain fluid caused her to slip into a coma and she died Nov. 7, just 38 days after being diagnosed.

For her distraught parents, the past 13 years have brought little solace.

"The pain never lessens — we just learn how to navigate better," Ileen said of the loss of a daughter whom she described as her sunshine. "We lost our



Meghan with her parents, Bob and Ileen, in 2003.

only child and all of the experiences that came with her — college years, marriage, grandchildren, etc. Meghan was robbed of her life and we were robbed of her."

"But you can't just sit on the couch and do nothing," Bob said of the grief process. "We never raised Meghan that way."

Turning heartache into hope

Driven by a desire that Meghan not just be another statistic — "hers was a life worth the world knowing," Ileen said — the Bradleys channeled their despair into their December 2004 creation of the Meghan Rose Bradley Foundation, a nonprofit organization devoted to raising awareness of and funding research for pediatric brain cancer, which had historically seen limited research funding to that point.

"On March 16, 2005, what would have been Meghan's 17th birthday, we started our 'Meg-a-Smile' bracelet campaign, which we named for her incredible smile and designed with a rosebud for her middle name," Ileen said, noting that over 10,000 bracelets have since been sold throughout the state.

The following March, Somerville High School paid special tribute to Meghan by organizing a candlelight ceremony on the field hockey field, while Sundaes in Branchburg donates 10 percent of its proceeds to the foundation on Meghan's birthday each year.

"It's a very public event and a lot of people come out to remember Meghan and raise awareness of pediatric brain cancer," Ileen said.

In addition, at the annual Meghan Rose Bradley Day at Branchburg Middle School, "kids can buy privileges like the opportunity to wear pajamas to school or listen to their iPod for \$2, and

every March the Branchburg police play the middle school faculty in basketball on behalf of the Foundation," Ileen said.

Other events keeping Meghan at the forefront of local hearts and minds include Don Denim Day at Somerville High School on behalf of the foundation and fundraising activities for the cause by the Branchburg Rotary as well as such school groups as the By Kids for Kids Club and The Sunshine Club.

The foundation is also passionate about recognizing future generations of Meghan's classmates.

"For over a decade, we've been thrilled to award three scholarships of \$500 to 1,000 each in Meghan's honor to deserving students at Somerville High School and five \$100 humanitarian awards to kids at Branchburg Middle School who demonstrate the characteristics of compassion, kindness, leadership and service that Meghan embodied," she said.

In 2016, the New Jersey Wireless Association donated \$25,000 to the foundation and named it their charity of the year, while the foundation's annual gala and Ladies Night Out events every September and February, respectively, have continued to boost fundraising efforts.

The cause has garnered more far-reaching support as well — specifically, thanks to the over \$340,000 raised by the foundation since 2005 and the grant it helped launch, biopharma company VBI Vaccines (in collaboration with Columbia University/NewYork-Presbyterian) has just been approved by the FDA to begin investigational testing on a novel immunotherapy treatment targeting brain cancer.

"We couldn't save our child, but with ongoing research, our hope is that as this condition is diagnosed, it will no longer be life-threatening and that kids can go on to recover completely and live a full,

happy, and healthy life," Ileen said.

In loving memory

"Meghan will always be near and dear to my heart," said Maggi Emmons, Meghan's eighth-grade homeroom and math teacher at Branchburg Middle School. "She was always smiling and cheerful and was so intelligent, nice and full of school spirit — just an inspiration to everyone around her," she said. "It's sad to think of what she could have been, but she can inspire a world of people based on how she lived."

"Meg was sweet, sensitive, generous and loving, and had a smile that could cheer up the world," added Dr. Shawn Temple, who teaches English and coached Meghan in field hockey at Somerville High School. "She was a great friend, an independent thinker, and a dedicated athlete who supported her teammates unconditionally."

"In the hallways, I remember her always waving at me with a big smile and saying, 'Hi coach! I hope you're having a great day!' She was an absolute joy to coach and I still coach field hockey and think of her daily," said Temple, who has been moved by the foundation's commitment to preserving Meghan's memory and providing support for children with brain cancer.

"The Bradleys are amazing advocates for all children and have worked tirelessly to make sure that no other family experiences the grief and loss they've endured."

State Sen. Kip Bateman (R-16th District), whose family knew Meghan and the Bradleys, also supports the foundation's work.

"Meghan was a special person and the Bradleys have truly turned a tragedy around to help others," Bateman said. "The community has really come out for this and we encourage people to support this great cause and hopefully help find a cure for pediatric brain cancer."

Through the progress being made by the foundation and the support of what they describe as "the amazing Branchburg community," the Bradleys hope that Meghan's spirit will continue to shine an indelible ray of light on the world.

"It's our wish that through Meghan's legacy," said Ileen, "other children will have the hope that she didn't have."

For more info

The Meghan Rose Bradley Foundation's 11th annual gala, featuring cocktails, dinner, dancing and a silent auction, will take place Saturday, Sept. 23, from 6 to 10 p.m. at the Birchwood Manor (111 North Jefferson Road, Whippany).

For more information about the gala or to donate to the cause, call 732-735-3291 or visit www.meghanrosebradleyfoundation.org.

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