

Cancer scholarship group's labor of love

By Susan Besze Wallace

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Tuesday, May 08, 2001 - LITTLETON - The jitters of graduation season are here. A group of friends is up late reading scholarship applications. They are excited, emotional. They have an eye to the future.

But they are not the receivers, they are the givers.

They've read through details of trauma and triumph, trying to decide which high school senior should receive Colorado's only known scholarship for childhood cancer survivors.

The experience was uplifting, except when they remembered the reason for the task, the dying wish of Stephen Marchello.

"This whole experience was something he would have loved to be a part of," said Michael Mann, who also reads applications on his bus commute downtown from Ken-Caryl. "I just wish we could give to everyone."

Mann is one of six friends and family members who compose the Stephen T. Marchello Scholarship Foundation, a homegrown group that rewards selected kids surviving cancer with \$10,000 for college. Stephen Marchello was 16 when a hockey injury refused to heal and revealed he had bone cancer. Between intense chemotherapy and surgeries to his leg, chest and head - and counseling kids with cancer - Marchello went on to graduate from Littleton's Heritage High School and the University of Arizona.

He attended medical school, scheduling weekend treatments to avoid missing classes. In January 1999, he lost his battle at age 28. At his request, others took up his passion for learning by creating the foundation.

Memorial scholarships aren't uncommon. But often they are limited to one high school. Over time, the significance of the name can fade. And sometimes such awards quietly disappear when a family moves on. The Marchello clan said it isn't going anywhere, and its effort is statewide.

"Education is invaluable, and it should be open to everyone," said foundation board member Jake McHerron, a college friend of Stephen's who now coaches lacrosse at Regis University. "This group, we bounce ideas for raising money off each other constantly. We talk daily. ... Stephen is still a force in my life."

It's no neat process, this annual drive to raise at least \$10,000 a year. Matching contributions are sought from employers of Stephen Marchello's friends and family. The family of Stephen's high school sweetheart gathered pledges from running a California marathon. Former Denver Bronco Reggie Rivers offered proceeds from a book signing. There have been auctions of autographed sports memorabilia. A few grants. A lot of pestering.

The Marchellos even held drawings for their treasured Avalanche season tickets.

"People have been mostly good to us, but cancer is still the big 'C word.' It seems to turn a lot of people off when it's connected with children," said Franci Marchello, Stephen's mom. "Some embrace you, some turn away, because they don't want to know it could happen to their kid."

About 1,900 children are diagnosed with cancer each year in Colorado, Idaho, North Dakota, Utah and Wyoming; 1,300 of those are under 15.

Mortality rates have steadily decreased over the past 30 years. Survival rates for acute lymphocytic leukemia, for example, have increased from 53 percent to 82 percent since the '70s, according to the American Cancer Society.

"These kids play hockey, work hard in school, they rebound and lead productive lives," said George Abbott of the American Cancer Society's Mile High unit.

"Cancer is being beaten in greater numbers, but it's not cheap. Insurance covers only so much, and a family of four without health concerns worries about getting children through college."

Tanner Randall, whose kidney-cancer treatment as a baby led to scoliosis and extensive back surgery as a Poudre High student, was a recipient of the inaugural Marchello scholarship last year.

"For me it was a huge help, and recognition of what I'd gone through," said Randall, now finishing his first year as a civil engineering major at Colorado State University. "They are awesome people, very caring. It's almost like having more grandparents. This is not money that will be wasted."

Cherry Creek High principal Kathy Smith said her daughter, also the recipient of a Marchello scholarship last year, is still overwhelmed by the honor.

"His memory and the wonderful things he tried to do lives on in these students," Smith said.

The application stack grew to 20 this year, and the \$10,000 scholarship was awarded to Calvin Mauger of Pueblo County High. Three \$1,000 grants will be given to Patience Williams of Palmer High, Jamie Campbell of Yuma High and Mark Aldred of Liberty High.

"I have to step back from it now and then," said mom Franci Marchello. "Reading about the surgery and the chemo - it brings it all back."

But Mario Marchello finds himself swimming in scholarship efforts 15 to 20 hours a week, using the wee hours to surf the Internet or write letters asking for donations to his son's legacy.

"To me," he said, "it keeps Steve alive."

Courtesy of the Marchello family.