

At Christofaro Park, Katie DeCubellis' memorial garden will be a place for 'peace and quiet'

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NARRAGANSETT -- For eight years, John and Meg DeCubellis, as cofounders of Pals of the Playground, would host a Halloween party that was a yearly fundraiser for the playground at Christofaro Park.

The party was for adults, but the DeCubellis children -- young Katie and Kyle -- would help out with the planning, and might even drop in for a few minutes to show off their Halloween costumes.

On Oct. 29, 1999, the DeCubellis family was busy getting ready for the ninth party, set for the next night at the town's North Beach Clubhouse. "And we didn't have it," Meg DeCubellis recalled, her voice trailing off.

On the evening of the 29th, Marsha Bowman was driving her daughter, Rebecca, who had just turned 14, and Rebecca's good friend, Katie DeCubellis, then 13, to the malls in Warwick. The teens were on a shopping mission for the costume accessories that would transform them into the Spice Girls for Halloween.

On Route 4 in East Greenwich, Mrs. Bowman's Honda Accord was slammed into from the back by a car driven by a drunk. The Honda veered out of control and across the grassy median where it was hit broadside by a car headed south.

Mrs. Bowman, 44, and Katie died on Route 4. Rebecca suffered a broken jaw, and three people in other cars were also injured. (The drunk, Stephen, Reise of Jamestown, got 14 years in prison. He had a blood alcohol level nearly twice the legal limit and was traveling at more than 85 miles an hour.)

As one might expect, the Halloween season is not a good time of the year for John and Meg DeCubellis, and Kyle, now 17, and daughter Eliza, 11, who was born after the Pals of the Playground began the Halloween party tradition.

But as the seventh anniversary of Katie's violent death approaches, the DeCubellis' emotions this Halloween season have been buoyed by something remarkable that is happening in Christofaro Park, which is off Boston Neck Road near Bridgetown Road in north Narragansett.

The park has a hill that overlooks the playground the DeCubellis family was instrumental in getting built. The hill is in a quiet corner of the park, away from the tennis and basketball courts that Katie used so much.

Atop that hill, with its big old oak tree, the Garden of Hope & Remembrance is taking shape, as a memorial to Katie DeCubellis and for use by the community.

"For us, the park is a very special place," Meg DeCubellis said last Friday. "It's because the playground is there, and she played tennis at the tennis courts and basketball at the basketball courts. She was always at that park."

The garden, which will take up half an acre, "is a little more sacred, a little more quiet" than the rest of the park, Mrs. DeCubellis said. "It's away from the soccer fields and the courts. It's a place you can walk away to -- for some peace, some quiet. It will be nice place for grandparents to sit after a soccer game."

So far, a bevy of volunteers has cleared the site, put in the foundation, laid the gravel, erected the sitting wall, and are in the process of doing the initial plantings, as designed by landscape architect Susan Saunders.

Saunders' design shows a "natural" outer area, featuring such shrubs as blueberries, viburnum and quince, along with a large redbud bush. Saunders "suggested redbud because it has heart-shaped leaves. She said, 'I think that would be cool.' We agree. It's special," Mrs. DeCubellis said.

From the outer "natural" area, visitors will walk into a more formal garden-style area, with a sort of plaza at its center, along with the sitting wall. The garden will feature boxwoods, azaleas, hydrangeas, and many beds with flowers that have been selected for blooms throughout the seasons.

"The plantings will have a lot of purples and blues," Meg DeCubellis said. "I like that because those were Katie's favorite colors."

In this inner garden, visitors can sit on the wall and reflect.

The garden plan also calls for a sculpture. Katie was an artist, and the family hopes some of Narragansett's young artists will provide some ideas and/or proposals.

After Katie's death, donations poured into the DeCubellis family. They took the money and set up the Katie DeCubellis Memorial Foundation. Along with a lot of money that came via fundraising efforts, the foundation has done such things as produce a three-part video about Katie's death, titled "The Deadly Consequences of Drunk Driving." It is now an official part of the Rhode Island driver education curriculum.

"The town and its people have been very good to us in supporting the foundation," Meg DeCubellis said. "The foundation thought the garden would be a good way to give back to the community."

That's a nice idea, but it's not working. The community is still giving back to Katie.

So far, everything that's been done at the Garden of Hope & Remembrance has been donated: from volunteers doing the clearing and plantings (including town workers), to the concrete (Cullion Concrete), to the sand and gravel (Timpson Sand & Gravel) to the stone (Tru-Stone) to the azaleas (Kinney Azalea Garden) to the lumber (Arnold Lumber) and so on.

The Katie DeCubellis Memorial Foundation can't expect the unlimited support to continue, however. So, it's selling bricks to go on the facing of the sitting wall and on a path leading to the garden's more formal section.

The bricks are \$50 each and contain up to three lines of text, with a maximum of 14 characters per line, including spaces. The bricks will be placed randomly. More information on the bricks is available at the foundation's web site, www.kdmf.org.

The Katie DeCubellis Memorial Foundation plans to put up a simple plaque somewhere in the garden in Katie's memory. The plaque will have the foundation's logo on it: the sun and its rays - on, of course, a blue background.

The logo comes from the cover of a greeting card that was designed by a young artist.

Katie DeCubellis was in the fourth grade when she made the card.

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