

Decubellis race honors one student, raises funds for others

By Garrett Sheehan/Independent Staff Writer

NARRAGANSETT - It is not simply a road race nor a small-time production. The Katie DeCubellis Foundation Memorial 5k, held at Narragansett High School, is part community fundraiser, part family reunion and, most importantly, part remembrance of an overachieving girl whose life was tragically taken almost six years ago.

October 29 will mark the six-year anniversary of when the Pier School eighth grader was killed by a drunk driver on Route 4. Sunday was the running of the sixth annual race in her name, which has remained steadily atop the list of biggest draws for road races in Rhode Island.

It's also one of two major events, including a golf tournament, organized by the Foundation each year, averaging more than 400 finishers. Race totals place it among a handful of the most successful in the state, only surpassed by a few major races like the CVS Downtown 5k and the Blessing of the Fleet.

"What's amazing is that's its gotten so big. We've been so successful in what we're trying to accomplish," said John DeCubellis, Katie's father. "We've created possibilities we never thought were possible."

June can be a difficult time of year for Katie's parents, John and Meg DeCubellis, especially recently. Last year would have marked Katie's graduation from high school and this summer would have been the close of her freshman year of college. But during such a tough time, there is nothing better than to be surrounded by than friends.

"It gets tough when you hit those milestones," John DeCubellis said. "Fortunately, we have this as an outlet. We're able to grieve with the community."

Instead of standing aside and letting the event run itself, John and Meg greeted each of the 426 finishers on Sunday with bottles of water as well as smiles, hugs and handshakes. They arrived around 7:30 a.m. to set up the 9:30 race and remained hours later, enjoying the sun and refreshments.

The event catered to everyone, including face painting and a blow-up pirate ship playpen for kids. Pizza, hot dogs and ice cream were plentiful, as were post-race fruits for the participants. Runners and volunteers young and old, including Katie's classmates, family friends and community members, gathered to converse and reminisce.

"It gets better every year. More people get involved," said Jill Harig, one of Katie's many friends on hand to volunteer a few hours. "It's nice for everyone to get together again. We can smile about it instead of crying like usual."

Their pain is evident, but John and Meg openly talk about Katie, knowing the race is primarily a day set up in spirit of their daughter.

"It's about keeping Katie's memory alive," John DeCubellis said. "Every time I shake someone's hand, I'm carrying on her legacy."

The other goal of the day is raising money for the Foundation, which is easily achieved. The dedication John and Meg pour into the event is acknowledged through entrance fees and donations, allowing them to raise \$15,000 to 20,000 annually.

The Foundation then puts the money towards scholarships for high school seniors, which are awarded each year to a Narragansett resident and a Rhode Islander who has overcome adversity. A general scholarship

for all Rhode Islanders is also in the works.

"It's been a testament to the community. No matter what event we've done, it's been over the top," John DeCubellis said. "People keep supporting our family and the cause."

Despite the grief they constantly stomach thinking about the senseless death of their daughter, John and Meg continue to embrace the role of educators, traveling around New England to speak to students about the accident and the consequences of drunk driving.

They have also produced a video chronicling Katie's death, which also includes speaking roles by Katie's friends. The video has grown in popularity and has been adopted as mandatory curriculum in R.I. high schools.

"It meant a lot of both of us," said Kristen Killooy, who stood side-by-side with friend Lauren Iannucci. Both participated in the video. "We wanted to get the word out about drunk driving. To change one person's life would mean everything. It's nice to be able to do something about it."

Aside from the festivities and objectives at hand, Sunday was actually a race day for the competitive runners. There was a winner, Michael Tammaro of Narragansett, who edged out Nemorio Falcon of Central Falls by 6 seconds, winning in 17:41. Rosie Sosnowski was the top female finisher, placing 12th overall in 19:13.

But for most it was a day to catch up on the past year and to smile together again. There is no other way Katie would have wanted it.

"People do it year in and year out. It's a time for them to touch base," John DeCubellis said. "Katie would have enjoyed everything we're doing. What was most important to her was her family and friends."