

Publication: Oakland Press;Date: Feb 1, 2010;Section: News;Page: A-1



Group assists families through medical crises

By **SHARON LONGMAN** Special to The Oakland Press

For 18 years, The Joel Jeremy Memorial Fund has donated more than \$250,000 to more than 150 families in medical crisis.

The founders of the fund know what these families are going through.

In 1991, two Highland Township families each suffered the loss of a child to a serious illness — Jeremy Arce, 13, and Joel Rabideau, 16. Friends of these families organized fundraisers to pay for help they needed. The next year, the families founded The Joel Jeremy Memorial Fund with the money left over to assist other families whose lives have been affected by serious illnesses.

“When you go through a battle like this, you’re fighting for your life or your kid’s life,” Mike Arce said. “You’re going to war. I know firsthand, because I was in the battle of my life trying to save my son. Giving assistance to people who are dealing with this is what we’re all about.”

Arce is president of the organization and Mike Rabideau is vice-president. Arce says the fund covers the West Oakland County area and they try to keep it local, but anyone may apply.

The nonprofit organization will host three fundraising dances in February to help families whose lives have been affected by serious illnesses. The Snowball Dances feature the 10-member group Snowball Band. The fundraiser and band are so named because of how they grew.

Admission is \$5, and there will be a raffle with 500 tickets sold for \$20 each. Seventeen winners will divide \$3,400, and winners need not be present. Tickets purchased by Feb. 13 will have chances to win at all three dances. Tickets may be purchased at the events or online.

Arce suggests those attending the dances should arrive early, because there’s usually a crowd.

How they help

The fund does not pay for medical expenses or prescriptions. Rather, it can cover gas for a long drive to the hospital and other travel expenses, meals and temporary housing.

They have put wheelchair lifts on vans, built ramps on homes and paid for baby sitters for parents’ other children.

Arce said they had a request from a single mom who couldn’t work because of treatment she was receiving for her illness. She was frustrated because she had been trying to get on disability and couldn’t find help. Fund members talked to her and gave her a check the next day to cover her mortgage, car payment and utilities.

Arce says she couldn’t believe it. She told them, “Who are you people? I’ve never heard of you. I’ve been on the phone with all these name organizations and no one will help — and here’s this little fund that gives me \$2,500,” he said.

They continued to help her for three months until help from other organizations began.

The Schmidt family of Waterford Township also received help from the fund while traveling for treatment for daughter Emily. Emily had non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma and the fund helped with travel, lodging, meals and bills.

“Even more than the monetary support was that they were just so caring,” Melissa Schmidt said. “They would

call just to see how we were doing and what was going on, and they let us know how they had been through some of the same things. They were a life support system for us, and gave us a lot of strength and resources to get the best care possible. The community jumped in to help, too. It was like a bunch of angels coming into action. Even though Emily's health was deteriorating, we still felt like God was with us with all the people he sent our way."

Emily's last wish was to visit Walt Disney World in Florida and swim with the dolphins. The Rainbow Connection and The Joel Jeremy Memorial Fund made that wish come true. Emily and her family had a three-day visit at Disney World and swam with the Dolphins at Discovery Cove. That night, she died.

How you can help

Whether the organization can help an individual family is based on the availability of funds, and they make decisions on a case-by-case basis. Applicants for assistance must submit a letter detailing what they need.

"We're going through the same things that other charities are," Arce said. "We have more requests for help and money going out and not as many donations coming in."

The organization accepts sponsorship year-round.

Gold record sponsors donate \$50, platinum sponsors donate \$100 and Friends of the Fund donate \$200. Gold record sponsors get recognition at 2010 Snowball Dances and hole sponsor with sign at the 2010 20th Annual Golf Outing in May. Platinum sponsorship also includes a link to the contributor's Web site, and Friend sponsorship includes being an official sponsor for all 2010 events and a Web link.



Photo courtesy of MELISSA SCHMIDT The Schmidts of Waterford Township — Craig, daughter Emily, Melissa, and son Hunter — swim with dolphins in Florida. Emily's last wish was to visit Walt Disney World and swim with dolphins. The Rainbow Connection and The Joel Jeremy Memorial Fund made that wish come true.