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Catie Hoch Foundation donates \$250,000 to fund medical research position

By: **GLENN GRIFFITH**

Advertisement

It has been seven years since Catie Hoch passed away from the effects of neuroblastoma, a type of cancer. The young girl who once told her mother to find a way to help kids take a break from cancer would have turned 16 March 13.

She remains, in many minds, the young girl who so loved the Yankees she debated tossing out the first ball for the arch rival Mets baseball team. She was gone before her parents Gina Peca and Larry Hoch could see their daughter enter her teen years and grow from a girl to a young woman. No dates, no proms, no corsages.

To honor her memory and remember her birthday the Catie Hoch Foundation March 30 donated \$250,000 to the Sloan-Kettering Memorial Cancer Center. The donation will help partially fund a translational medical position for neuroblastoma.

The occasion was marked by a joyous ceremony at the Vista Restaurant at the Van Patten Golf Course, Clifton Park with 60 of the foundation's long time and strongest supporters.

In addition to the official announcement of the donation the event also served as a belated birthday party for Catie with many people sharing memories of her through laughter and tears.

"We are tremendously grateful for this donation," said Sloan-Kettering director of development Zena M. Abdulahad. "This will make a significant difference in research. The foundation's dedication to the mission inspires Dr. (Nai-Kong) Cheung and his associates everyday."

Cheung was Hoch's oncologist during her treatment and he continues to keep the foundation abreast of his research. He was to be the featured speaker at the event but was involved in an auto accident while driving upstate with his wife.

The foundation's donation will help fund an endowed fellowship that supports a doctor in training. The translational medical position will take results from the lab and move them quicker than normal to a patient's bedside.

"This position will be a bridge for scientific advances to improved health care," said Carol Blumenfeld, Sloan-Kettering's major gifts officer.

The cancer center is presently making efforts to expand several of its translational medical positions. The Catie Hoch Foundation's donation will fund the first in the field of neuroblastoma.

Total funding necessary to fully endow the position for perpetuity is estimated to be \$1.5 million. Members of the Catie Hoch Foundation wasted no time after making the initial donation to start locating the rest of the money.

"This is Catie's Garden of Hope," Peca said from the podium. "Each ladybug represents \$1,000. By the end of the year we want 100 ladybugs up here. We have 12 already that we can put up right now."

By the end of the evening there were three more ladybugs in the garden.

To get the additional money needed for the endowment Peca announced the foundation is in the process of expanding its visibility. Mtwo Design is a division of public relations company Media Logic. The division works with non-profits and the company has offered the foundation its marketing help.

"We'll try to elevate the look of the foundation, get it better known," said the division's executive director Peggy Conway.

"The foundation works with Albany Med, Dana Farber Institute in Boston, and Sloan-Kettering in New York City. These are three major hospitals. We'd like them to be the voice of the foundation. That will take them to the next level of visibility."

As part of that enhanced visibility supporters viewed the foundation's new power point presentation which gives information on how and why it was formed, its sources of funding, and some of the responses it has received from recipients.

The foundation has followed Catie's advice to "give families some fun money" so they can take a break from the ordeals that come with cancer treatment.

The money was used for carriage rides in New York city, a Thanksgiving dinner, shopping trips to the FAO Schwartz toy store, visits to the Bronx Zoo, and of course Yankee baseball games.

The foundation got off to a booming start in 1999 with its largest donation coming from author J.K. Rowling. Rowling is the author of the Harry Potter series of adventure novels.

She read from a draft of one of her books to Catie over the phone. Later, the author sent the foundation a check for \$100,000.

"The phone call, Emails, and the check just came out of the blue," Peca said. "The phone call was such a gift I can't tell you. And the donation gave the foundation its start. She is so generous."

At the donation ceremony Peca thanked the foundation's volunteer board directors for all their hard work. "Not bad for seven housewives," she said to long and sustained applause.

Jackie Asterino is one of the early contributors to the foundation. She said she connects to the feelings that surround the foundation's origin. Asterino had a niece who died of a childhood medical condition.

"We had a friend on the board," she said, "and we thought we could make a difference. It was a local foundation and we liked that."

Jessica and Allan Richer are also long time supporters of the Catie Hoch Foundation. They attended the event with their daughter and watched the results of their fund raising efforts get transferred to Sloan-Kettering..

"We knew Catie from when she was an infant," Jessica Richer said. "We all endured the tragedy and we're inspired how Gina and Larry have taken strength to reach out to others in similar circumstances. They've gone out and made themselves available to other families. To go through the experience again and again with others is remarkable."

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