

LOCAL & REGION



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Blue Bell couple continues daughter's work in nonprofit to help families of seriously ill

By Kristin E. Holmes Inquirer Staff Writer

The moment when Phil and Nancy Siegel realized their daughter had found a new calling came in a hospital room.

Jillian A. Siegel, 20, was battling acute myeloid leukemia at Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore, but the Pennsylvania State University sophomore was working the phones and writing letters to help organize Thon, the giant annual charity dance marathon at her school.

"We thought, 'We've got to stop this, she's got to rest,'" said Nancy Siegel, of Blue Bell. "But then we thought, this is the passion that you want your child to have."

Several months later, Jillian Siegel died. Two weeks later, her friends at Penn State paid tribute to her with a video presentation at Thon.

Phil and Nancy Siegel have decided to continue their daughter's work. They founded a nonprofit that will benefit struggling families of seriously ill young people, like the ones they met when Jillian was in treatment.

The organization, Jill Just Wants 2 Help, aims to provide financial help and a place to stay for families of young adults being treated for the blood cancers leukemia and myeloma at the Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania.

The organization, working with Penn Medicine, expects to begin providing grants at the end of next year and ultimately wants to build a Jill's House. The residence would provide housing for families close to their hospitalized loved ones.

"We saw families that couldn't visit their children because parents had to work, or they had other children to take care of," said Phil Siegel, 65, an orthodontist. "They had to make choices between paying for education or transportation to the hospital or paying their rent."

Organizations such as Jill Just Wants 2 Help are often started by people affected by the loss of a loved one, said Jennifer Ross, a spokeswoman for the Pennsylvania Association of Nonprofit Organizations.

But motivation is not enough, Ross said. A sound business plan and funding sources are imperative.

The Siegels eagerly plunged into the complicated legal and administrative undertaking. They partnered with a major hospital and formed a board of directors in an endeavor that often evoked the sadness tied to Jillian's death.

So far, the charity has raised about \$40,000 from donations. It will have a fund-raiser Saturday night at the Green Valley Country Club in Lafayette Hill. The sold-out dinner dance is being hosted by From the Heart, a group of 19 mothers, most from Montgomery County, who raise money for charity.

The event is the 23rd From the Heart, which has raised more than \$1 million for charities including the ALS Foundation, Shriners Hospital, and the Make-a-Wish Foundation, said Jill Goldwater, cochair of the dinner dance.

The members of From the Heart started working to help the Siegel family several months before Jillian died. The group held two drives in conjunction with the National Marrow Donor Program in an effort to find a bone-marrow donor for Jillian. None was found. But two donor matches were found for people needing transplants at hospitals, including one in Washington state.

"It was bittersweet," said Goldwater, of Lafayette Hill. "We were disappointed, but we were warned that we probably wouldn't be successful for Jillian. But the feeling was that if it helped anyone, we were good with that."

Organizers hope to raise at least \$150,000 for Jill Just Wants 2 Help at the fund-raiser.

The decision to start a charity in Jillian's memory was easy, Phil Siegel said. Even as a little girl, Jillian would plead with her father to give a donation to homeless people they passed on the street.

"The conversation would go on for four blocks, until I did something," Phil Siegel said.

Siegel and his wife described their daughter as fun-loving and generous, a fan of kitsch art on velvet canvases and the Van Warped Tour, an alternative music and extreme sports festival.

Jillian played soccer and field hockey at the Woodynde School in Strafford, which specializes in teaching students



LAURENCE KESTERSON / Staff Photographer Nancy and Phil Siegel have created a nonprofit in honor of their daughter, Jillian, who died of leukemia. They want to raise money for families of adolescents struggling with illnesses.

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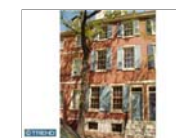
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with learning disabilities. Jillian, who had a cognitive disability, blossomed at Woodlynde, said Nancy Siegel, 56.

At Penn State, Jillian found a tutor to help her with studies and joined a sorority until her health forced her to leave school.

After she died, hundreds came to her funeral at Congregation Beth Or in Maple Glen.

"When she passed away, we wanted to do something in the community to help," Phil Siegel said, "something that her name would appear on, so people would know she was here."

Contact staff writer Kristin E. Holmes at 610-313-8211 or kholmes@phillynews.com.

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iamAteacher2 Posted 07:56 AM, 11/06/2010

This is a beautiful story! I am faced with much the same problem. My spouse was diagnosed with Stage IV cancer a month ago at age 34. Liver resectioning will be at MSKCC in NYC. I will probably have to stay at a youth Hostel so I can be there for surgery and treatment (min 6 days) and we can't afford the hotel rates :(That is so amazing that you are going to help people during their most vulnerable times.

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cyberpenn Posted 08:10 AM, 11/06/2010

iamAteacher2
Please know our hopes and best wishes are with you. Its not an easy task but just being their for your spouse does more than you can imagine.
Phil and Nancy

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