

Comer legacy: info to fight cancer

Wednesday, June 25, 2003 - EVERY DAY a child or young adult dies years before his or her time. The reaction from people is always similar -- it's crushing, and all feel it in their hearts, but they also feel it's something that would never happen to them.

Sadly, that's not always a reality. Take the Tri-Valley for example. In the past few years alone, there has been a number of young adults or even preteen children who have lost their lives.

Some died in tragic auto accidents, while others fell prey to some type of disease or illness. You may not have actually known these kids, but didn't you feel as if you did when you looked at their pictures or read their stories?

Didn't you hug your own children a little bit harder that day or lie awake a little bit longer that night staring at the ceiling?

You didn't personally know the child who died, but you hurt just the same.

There are many tough parts of a young person's death with which to deal, but perhaps the toughest is being left to wonder if there was something you could have done to prevent their passing.

Be it something like cancer or another illness, as the person is deteriorating before your eyes, there's a feeling of helplessness that can be consuming.

After they die, frustration reaches a high as many can't grasp the fact that there was nothing that could have been done. Such was the case for friends and family of former Amador Valley High athlete Ryan Comer.

Comer was diagnosed in the late 1980s with a rare form of cancer called rhabdomyosarcoma. When the cancer went into remission for a while, Ryan's mom, Billie, learned about an experimental bone marrow treatment that could help if the cancer reappeared.

And once the cancer returned, the community raised \$180,000 toward the treatment. But tragically, Ryan died before the bone marrow transplant could come to fruition.

The money was put into a trust fund until the family could figure out what to do with it. Shortly thereafter, \$150,000 of the money was donated to the ValleyCare Health Library in large part because Billie believed that if up-to-date information had been available to her, Ryan may still be alive. Billie wanted to make sure families in the future had the resources her family lacked when Ryan became ill.

The Cancer Resource Center of the Health Library carries Ryan's name today and is known as the Ryan Comer Cancer Research Center.

But the fight to help families of cancer patients didn't end with the initial funding to start the library. It's continued in a number of ways, with one being The Hop Yard Ale House Golf Scramble that benefits the Ryan Comer Cancer Resource Center.

This year's tournament is Sept. 22 at the Castlewood Country Club.

Otis Nostrand, the owner of the Hop Yard, was raised in Pleasanton and, like many of us who have been in Pleasanton for many years, was hit hard when Ryan died.

While I spent a couple of years as a soccer coach for Ryan when he was 10 and 11, Otis had a much deeper connection with both Ryan and his family. While the Comers were battling with Ryan's illness, Nostrand was watching his brother-in-law Mike Dolan also fall victim to cancer.

The Dolans and the Comers became close during the ordeals that saw the two young men die about a year apart. Mike was few years older than Ryan, but both were Pleasanton kids through and through.

Following the deaths came the feelings of frustration and helplessness.

"You get so frustrated because you can't get enough information," Nostrand said. "You need information to fight a battle, but there wasn't enough out there."

So when the Comer family put the money into starting the research center, Nostrand felt his Hop Yard golf tournament was the perfect vehicle to help fund the center and keep it growing.

"We felt like (the Comers) made the effort for the center in Ryan's name, and we wanted to help support that," Nostrand said. "The perfect outlet was the golf tournament. We want this to be a community event. There's a lot of good people in the community, so why not get them involved?"

And it has. The Hop Yard Golf Committee, which numbers around 20, is all made up of longtime Pleasanton residents.

In addition, the tournament each year allows friends of Ryan's to come back together to celebrate their friend's life as well as help others in Ryan's name.

In addition to providing a nice day of golf and fun for a good cause, the tournament can also go a long way toward helping to eliminate some of those feelings of helplessness.

"You can't bring back Ryan and Mike, but maybe we can help some other family who doesn't think something like that could happen to them," Nostrand said. "Maybe we can help them deal better with the frustration we had to face."

It's not as if the cancer research center presents a cure for cancer, nor does anyone associated with the tournament harbor any false illusions.

What it does is to help to supply families with as much information as possible relating to the various forms of cancer. It can enlighten people as to what they're fighting and what might be available solutions.

It can strengthen their resolve and ultimately their faith.

"One of the things you are grasping for is hope," Nostrand said. "As much as anything, that's what (the center) helps with. It keeps you up to date. The information gives you hope. What makes the research center special is all the information is in one place. Before, there was no clearing center to get information. Now there's a heck of a lot of information in one place."

If you're interested in playing in or helping to sponsor the Hop Yard Ale House Golf Scramble to benefit the Ryan Comer Cancer Resource Center at the ValleyCare Health Library, contact Nostrand at 426-9600.