The Morgan Center Story Revealed

By GARY W. WOJTAS

It was the 1980 Miracle on Ice, U.S. Hockey Coach Herb Brooks who once said "Great moments, come from great opportunity."

I'm sure Rod and Nancy Lee Zuch did not look at their then two-year-old daughter Morgan's leukemia diagnosis as a great moment nor a great opportunity, but it has certainly turned into something special for many local people.

You see, Morgan's battle with this dreaded disease was the inspiration behind the Morgan Center, the first pre-school in the country for children diagnosed with pediatric cancer. It just so happens to be located in Plainview.

The annual fund-raiser for the Morgan Center (themorgancenter.org) at Southward Ho Country Club in Bay Shore was held earlier this year. It was an auction and dinner, coordinated by Members of the American Culinary Federation of Long Island, featuring chefs from area restaurants, attended by several hundred caring individuals. On the surface a nice and important event, but certainly not anything completely unique as far as fund-raisers go.

While the event itself may have been done before, the Morgan Center most certainly has not. Here's a little education: The Morgan Center was the brainchild of Rod and Nancy Lee Zuch; Rod, a well-known area marketing executive and Nancy Lee, a teacher. The Zuchs are South Shore Suffolk people, 40ish, pretty non-descript actually.

This very normal couple has a daughter, Morgan, who as I mentioned before, was diagnosed with leukemia about five years ago at age two. A depleted immune system, related to her months of treatment, did not allow Morgan to experience pre-school. Fortunately, through some incredible health care and her sheer courage and determination, Morgan has been in remission for over three years and today lives the "normal" life of most eight-year-old Long Islanders.

Because of their daughter's situation, the Zuchs wondered about other families stricken with pediatric cancer and their pre-school options. It seems many have experienced the same thing—because of treatment their kids couldn't go to "normal" pre-school either. A large group of students, Morgan included, were completely missing out on the socialization and camaraderie of pre-school. To the Zuchs, this was unacceptable.

Light bulb. So Rod and Nancy Lee set out to see what pre-schools for kids with cancer were out there. And, surprisingly, or maybe even unbelievably, the answer was none. None on Long Island, none in New York City, none in New York state. Jersey? Connecticut? Again, no and no. In fact, the "no" resounded from coast to coast. That's right: No pre-school center for cancer stricken kids existed in the entire nation.

Unlike many other people who have had a positive outcome to their health-related plight, the Zuchs refused to turn their backs on the issue. Hence, the idea for the Morgan Center was born. What's even more telling about this entire process is that Morgan Zuch never even went to the school herself. She was too old when the school was founded. The Zuchs knew and understood how important missing pre-school was to their daughter and they refused to let others go through the same thing.

As in most stories of charity and philanthropy, it takes a team of caring people to make change. Rod and Nancy Lee are very careful to deflect accolades from themselves onto others. From the generosity of Charles Wang, who donated space for the Center in his Islander office building on Round Swamp Road in Plainview, to the incredible volunteers and donors, and the Center's teachers, there are many caring people who got the Center going and keep it prospering.

However, with Nancy Lee teaching and Rod schmoozing and fundraising and raising awareness, and even their 11-year-old son, Trevor, getting actively involved, the Center remains an indelible part of the Zuch's life. It's continuing existence is directly through their blood, sweat and tears.

Father Tom Hartman was also at the fund-raiser I was at and smiled that wry smile of his as he announced that the Zuchs hope to take the Morgan Center concept nationwide. Pie in the sky? Don't bet against them.

For the 25 local families who now have their children prospering and playing as pre-schoolers at the center, this is incredible news. These 25 kids now have the opportunity to do what every other pre-schooler does: learn, play, have snacks, sing songs, and do arts and crafts and show and tell. Thanks to the Zuchs, they can do this together in a safe and comfortable environment.

The children's educational experience is also completely free. All of the Center's operational costs are donated. All. Rod and Nancy Lee know the parents of these pupils already have plenty on their minds right now and pre-school costs are not high on the list. They've been there and done that.

Next time you get an invitation to another fund-raising activity, try to do a little research on the organization. I know there are other important Zuchs out there. Where would our community be without them?