

'Numbers aren't what matter — dreams are'

For more than a decade, Jason's Dreams for Kids has helped ill children

BY GLORIA STRAVELLI
Staff Writer

They were inseparable. Dennis McGinnis and Jason and Jeremy Creager were more than uncle and nephews.

"They were more like brothers to me," said McGinnis, who doted on the twin boys born in 1973 to his sister, Diana.

In fact, for a while before he moved east and married, McGinnis lived with his sister and the boys in their native Dallas.

After McGinnis moved to New Jersey, he would drive to Pennsylvania, where his sister had relocated, and pick up the boys to spend weekends with him and his wife.

By the time Jason was 17 years old, the boy had developed the same outgoing manner as his "Uncle Dee-Dee."

"He was me all over again. His personality was like mine. I'm a people person, and he was the same way," McGinnis recalled. "I was like his go-to; if something difficult came up, he would say, 'Uncle Dee-Dee can do it.'"

In 1991, what initially appeared to be a bout of appendicitis turned out to be more serious when a CAT scan revealed a tumor in Jason's lower intestine.

In April, he was diagnosed as having Burkitt's lymphoma, a form of cancer that occurs mainly in children.

"This disease is very aggressive," McGinnis explained. "In most cases, if the tumor recurs, it's fatal."

Jason underwent extensive surgery and began an aggressive chemotherapy regimen in July of that year.

By September, another tumor had formed, and doctors began a bone marrow transplant on Jason's 18th birthday in October.

On Dec. 12, 1991, McGinnis got a phone call from Jason.

"Uncle Dee-Dee, do you know what I want for Christmas," Jason asked. "The doctors told me I only have six weeks to live. Don't let me die, and if I do, make me a promise that you'll never forget me."

That promise was the beginning of Jason's Dreams for Kids Inc., a foundation founded by McGinnis that helps children faced with catastrophic illnesses and their families.

"At first it was just a way to help my sister with the medical bills," explained McGinnis, whose nephew succumbed to the disease on Jan. 18, 1992.

"I never imagined it would grow to become what it has. It's my whole life. I work because I have to," admitted McGinnis, who is the owner of McGinnis Printing on Monmouth Street in Red Bank, "but my foundation is my life."

A year after Jason's death, McGinnis used the remainder of the money he and friends had raised to fund improvements to the pediatric isolation ward at the hospital where Jason had been treated.

He and his buddies continued to raise funds informally, mainly through a golf tournament.

"It was just friends, golf buddies, trying

to help somebody. We didn't have a name or definite focus yet," he explained.

Then McGinnis heard about a 9-year-old who had been diagnosed with a brain tumor and he showed up at the family's River Plaza home one night.

"I just knocked on their door and the dad answered," McGinnis said. "He asked, 'Who are you?' And I answered, 'I'm nobody important, but I have something for you,' and I handed him a check for \$5,000."

By 1995, Jason's Dreams for Kids Inc. was incorporated with the simple mission of "just putting a smile on a kid's face" by granting a special wish.

According to McGinnis, Jason's Dreams for Kids hears about the children it helps through word-of-mouth and referrals from families of other ailing children, hospital social workers and various community groups.

With the help of a cadre of some 20 volunteers, McGinnis responds to reports by contacting families.

"We ask, 'What can we do for your child?'" he explained.

The responses vary widely.

This season Jason's Dreams is fulfilling wishes that range from Disney get-aways to a toy shopping spree.

"We're taking Miles, 4, who has a degenerative spinal disease, to the world's largest Toys R Us in New York City,"

McGinnis said.

"Ronald, 7, who has cerebral palsy, is at Disney World right now, and we bought toys and paid travel expenses for Lucas, 8, who is undergoing a bone marrow transplant at an out-of-state hospital."

Often, helping a child includes lifting some of the financial burden from families, McGinnis noted.

"I feel if we can take the burden off the family, it will enhance the kid's care because there won't be so much stress," explained the Middletown resident, who has literally arranged to have a new roof put over the heads of an ailing child's family.

"My friend has a roofing company, and I arranged for him to donate a new roof for a house," he explained. "People asked me why I did that, saying it wasn't for the kid. But those people had buckets sitting on the floor because the roof was leaking and medical bills for their child didn't leave any money for a new roof. Doing that changed this child's life for the better, and that's what we're out to do."

Through a network of private donors and corporate sponsors, opportunities to "put a smile on a kid's face" often come up, sometimes in the form of donated tickets to sports events like the N.J. Devils game attended by Jonathan Harmon of Middletown.

"They're my favorite team," explained the 11-year-old recently.

Jonathan also recalled eating "a million hot dogs" on last year's Boat Ride With Santa, an annual event sponsored by SeaStreak ferry service.

"All the kids we've helped through the year, plus their siblings, friends and parents, are invited," McGinnis said.

Some 254 children and families were treated to the outing last year during which Santa distributes gifts to each child and



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Jonathan Harmon (l), of Middletown, is one of the children who have been helped by Jason's Dreams for Kids Inc., founded by Red Bank businessman Dennis McGinnis (r).

refreshments are served.

This year's event is set for Dec. 21.

The gifts come through toy drives and donations from numerous local businesses and donors.

Those who want to contribute to this year's event can access the foundation by visiting www.JasonsDreamsforKids.com.

Other events designed to put a smile on a kid's face include baseball games at the Lakewood BlueClaws stadium.

McGinnis organizes at least one event per year to get all the children being helped together socially.

The golf tournament McGinnis and a handful of friends began 10 years ago has grown into the Jason Douglas Creager Memorial Golf Outing, held this year at Fort Monmouth, which drew 155 golfers and raised \$15,000 to help children who, like Jason, are faced with life-threatening illnesses.

Several other fund-raisers are held throughout the year.

On Thanksgiving weekend, Jason's Dreams sponsored a Turkey Bowl at Sickles Field in Little Silver.

The touch football tournament had 160 participants and raised about \$14,000.

Other benefits include concerts — country singer Kevin Sharp, a childhood cancer survivor, is an ardent supporter and has recorded a song based on a tribute to Jason written by his uncle.

McGinnis attributes the foundation's successful fund raising to the fact that the lion's share of funds — 92.3 cents of every dollar raised — goes directly to granting children's wishes.

"People know when I come to them

where the money goes," said McGinnis, whose business underwrites much of the costs of Jason's Dreams for Kids. "There are no administrative costs. People love that."

McGinnis refuses to tally the number of children Jason's Dreams has helped thus far.

"I don't count. Do you know why?" he asked. "I don't put a number on my kids. I don't know whether it's one, 10 or 500. A lot of places do, but when kids come to us, they become part of our family, so I don't like to use numbers."

Although the children have different illnesses, they have one thing in common, he noted.

"Their illnesses are catastrophic, life threatening."

Most, perhaps 95 percent, are cancer victims, but McGinnis said some have cerebral palsy, sickle-cell anemia and severe autism.

Many recover, he said, but there are those who don't.

"There's a lot of sorrow," he acknowledged, "but the joy is when you have a 7-year-old invite you to his class, and he introduces you as the man who saved his life. Or when a young man calls and says, 'Remember me? You granted a wish for me five years ago, and I'm 18 now.' That makes it all worthwhile."

With 10 years of helping "put a smile on a kid's face," McGinnis knows the measure of the future of Jason's Dreams for Kids.

How long will he keep this going? He answers without hesitation.

"Until I'm reunited with Jason."