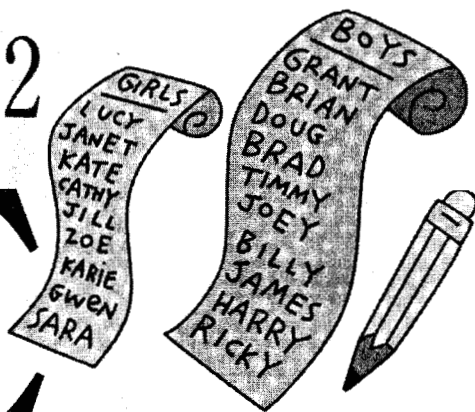


SCENE

THE TWO RIVER TIMES SECTION 2



FUN AND GAMES

Can you pass the holiday trivia test? It spans the last century, so put your thinking caps on.

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ART

See what Afridesia plans for the coming year.

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THE WEEK OF DECEMBER 24 - 31, 1999

Dennis McGinnis

Year-Round Santa For Critically Ill Children

Holiday activity is at its peak. Looking toward Broad Street, one sees the big Christmas tree glittering with lights and decorations. Elves (Yes, Virginia, Red Bank has real elves!) can be seen carrying packages for weary holiday shoppers. One Monmouth Street shop window has gothic gold lettering that says "McGinnis Printing."

Underneath, in smaller letters, is "Home of Jason's Dreams for Kids." This is the place where the holiday spirit lasts all year and touches most of the people who enter. This is where you'll find Dennis McGinnis, the all-year Santa who spends his time making dreams of catastrophically ill children and their families come true.

Dennis came to the Red Bank area in 1979 to visit an uncle. He got a nice job with a printing company, liked the area and stayed. Eleven years later Dennis opened his own printing business at 7 Monmouth Street. He outgrew the space and moved to his present location of 20 Monmouth Street. He met his wife, Linda (a Middletown girl), and twelve years ago, and they became the proud parents of Kevin Allen Khyung McGinnis. Linda has been a teacher in Keansburg for 30 years.

Originally from Texas, Dennis is one of four children. On April 12,

1992, the family was told that the cancer had moved to his liver. Approval for a new experimental chemotherapy came on January 16, 1992. Jason became an angel on January 18, 1992.

Loss, grief and the frustration of distance caused great anger.

"I hated God so bad. My heart had been ripped out," Dennis said. But he found his faith again and believes that it is Jason who has led him to what has become his life's work.

In 1992 he began to work closely with another organization that helped families with sick children, but Jason had other plans for his uncle: Jason's Dreams for Children was founded, and Dennis' avocation was realized.

The back walls of the print shop are filled with pictures of children. All of them have smiles brought about by being given a memory or happy moment that will last them forever.

Dennis beams as he shows this child at Disney World or that one at the NCAA finals in Indianapolis. Justin met Bruce Springsteen, and Richie got to be in the movie "Gloria."

But this organization doesn't just grant dreams. It tries to help with the needs of the families that so often go unmet when they are faced with the demands of having a desperately ill child. Dennis has found a

Wheelchairs, special eyeglasses, walkers, helping with funeral expenses, buying a headstone, food and medical supplies or sometimes just a dinner out for Mom and Dad are some of the many ways funds have been provided to these families.

Liz Halpin of Shrewsbury knows firsthand of the kind of support a family needs during such a chaotic time. Her son Conner was diagnosed at 26 months with the same cancer that Jason had.

"I can tell you firsthand as a parent that helplessly watching your child go through the daily ordeal of treatment after treatment is totally devastating," Liz said. Constantly facing the ups and downs of your child's fragile physical condition and dealing with crisis after crisis, you begin to wonder if your once-happy child will ever smile again. All this certainly takes a toll on the entire family.

Dennis entered the lives of Liz and Kevin Halpin and their son Conner. When Conner finished treatment and was well enough to

travel, Dennis arranged for the family to go Disney World. "It was just what we needed to get some normalcy back in our lives," they said. Liz and Kevin now devote much of their time and efforts to Jason's Dreams for kids. The best part of their story is that, as of November 5th, Conner has been cancer-free for three years.

Dennis can often be found at the hospital sitting with a family through a rough night, or delivering Christmas presents to a family in need. Last year Dennis received one of his greatest presents. When his son, Kevin, discovered his allowance in his pocket after delivering Christmas presents to a local family, he told his father to wait a minute and ran back in the house to give the money to the family inside.

Last year, the foundation devoted its energies to several successful fund-raisers. In April a joint effort with the Count Basie Theatre in Red Bank realized funds for the foundation as well as the Count Basie Learning Center and the Children of the World. June brought a Benefit

Golf Tournament and a Count Basie Theatre benefit performance by Country Western star Kevin Sharp. Kevin is a cancer survivor and "Wish-granter of the Year" (from the Make A Wish Foundation). This performance yielded a special benefit, in that it inspired a new friendship between singer and printer. Kevin will return to the Count Basie on January 22, for another benefit concert for Jason's Dreams for Children.

In the meantime, Dennis has his work cut out for him. The Jason's Dreams for Children foundation is selling holiday ornaments with 100 percent of the donation going to the foundation. The foundation has also adopted St. Clare's home in Neptune. This is a care facility for infants with AIDS and HIV complications. The foundation hopes to raise money or find a van to transport the babies for their treatments. Having received their 501.3 (c) tax designation allows all donations to be tax deductible. Dennis and the other members of the foundation have worked hard to ensure that

donations received go to the families in need in their entirety. This often means that administrative and overhead costs come from their own pockets.

Dennis is a man determined to leave a legacy behind for his nephew Jason. He moves through his days with humor and love, pulling everyone he meets into his net of caring. He tries to act like a tough guy, but it soon dissolves into this truly compassionate man.

His goal? "To someday, somehow, make a difference in a kid's life," he said. "God gives me the courage to do this. Jason is always with me and guides me in knowing the right thing to do." Dennis believes that Jason is a guardian angel for all children, and that he has been touched by an angel. Anyone who meets Dennis McGinnis will feel touched by an angel, too.

By Peggy Sturmfels

JASON

*It seems like only yesterday
we found out you were ill.
They said that it was cancer;
the room got very still.*

*We thought that you'd be better,
that it would be okay.
The hope grew larger
with each passing day.*

*You fought and hated treatment;
for that I'm sorry, dear.
If only it had worked,
you would still be here.*

*We often ask the question:
why did you take our Jay?
God answers that question
a little more each day.*

*A hand reached down to take you,
to take you home above.
A beautiful thing coming
just flying like a dove.*

*We love you dearly, Jason,
for that you will agree,
Just give us inspiration
so we will join thee.*

-Dennis McGinnis

1991, Dennis received word that his 17-year-old nephew Jason Douglas Creagor was diagnosed with Burkitts lymphoma. Burkitts is cancer that is characterized by tumors containing lymphoid cells growing in the eyes, jaw and internal organs. It occurs mostly in children and is associated with the Epstein Barr virus.

"Jason underwent extensive surgery on April 16 and started aggressive chemotherapy in late May," said Dennis. "October 5, 1991 was Jason's 18th birthday, and he entered the hospital to have a bone marrow transplant. On January 3,

way to do that by allowing his organization to work in cooperation with other organizations to help meet the goals of a specific project. One instance of that is when Jason's Dreams for Children became one of the Friends for Ricky Ashmore. Working with the many friends and family members of the Ashmores in Middletown, this group raised more than \$15,000 to benefit a 7-year-old Keansburg boy diagnosed with Duchenne muscular dystrophy. This money may be used to fund a radical cell-transplant procedure that would not be covered by medical insurance.

