

Kortney's Challenge raises funds for pediatric brain cancer research

Written by Bonnie Delaney Special to the Asbury Park Press

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OCEANPORT — Abbey McLean, 15, still recalls the little things about her childhood friend, Kortney Rose Gillette.

"I can remember going to Build-A-Bear workshops with her and how my dad had to put chopsticks up his nose to get her to laugh," Abbey said, adding that Kortney was a kind girl who loved animals. "It was hard to get her to laugh."

Abbey was among hundreds who came to Monmouth Park Racetrack Sunday for the eighth annual Kortney's Challenge, to remember the girl for whom the two-mile fun run and walk is named, and to raise funds for research into the disease that claimed her life.

Kortney died April 27, 2006, four months after being diagnosed with terminal brainstem glioma, a pediatric brain cancer, at the age of 9.

Her parents Kristen and Ed Gillette founded the nonprofit, all-volunteer Kortney Rose Foundation in an effort to heal from the loss and to raise money for pediatric brain tumor research at the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia (CHOP). As of Dec. 21, the foundation has donated a total of \$628,000, according to Gillette.

Gillette told throngs of attendees Sunday that the bulk of National Cancer Institute funding supports adult cancer research, leaving little to support pediatric cancer, and even less for pediatric brain cancer.

According to its own records, the institute spent \$631.2 million on breast cancer research in 2010, more than any other type of research it funded.

"It's so hard to know that all the research going on is focused on breast cancer," Gillette said.

Gillette, too, took time to reminisce about her daughter.

She said Kortney, who would have been 17 if she still were alive, liked basketball and soccer.

"She was my athlete," Gillette said, adding that Kortney's older sister, Kasey, 20, is the artist in the family.

Jess and Nick DiNapoli of Oceanport were among the 500 people pre-registered to take part in the fundraising race. They attended with their sons, Nicholas, 9, and Tanner, 5, and daughter, Ava, 8, who was diagnosed with a brain tumor at the age of 4.

"She's fine now and goes for her next MRI on Tuesday," said Jess DiNapoli, adding that Ava's tumor was found to be benign after it was removed.

"We're here to support the research that is being done to find a cure for pediatric brain tumors," she said.

Melissa Kopec of West Long Branch came to the race with her daughters, Julianne, 10, and Madelyn, 12.

“We run recreationally, but are mostly here to support his cause,” said Kopec, who has held fundraisers for the foundation at her preschool, the Ivy Hedge in Ocean Township.

Shore area businesses, too, showed their support for the cause.

Holly Migliaccio of Oceanport ran and supported Gillette’s efforts through her business, rook coffee roasters™, located in the borough, Ocean Township and Long Branch. Rook staff served cold-brewed coffee at the finish line.

Abbey, who will be a junior at Shore Regional High School next month, was at the benefit with her dance school, Dance Plus in Little Silver. About 40 dancers kicked off the event with a performance.

Gillette said her efforts are growing even beyond the annual run and walk in her daughter’s name.

She said the foundation is planning a fundraiser — Alex’s Brain Tumor Bash — to be held Sept. 26 in honor of Alex Munoz, a local 15-year-old who recently underwent surgery to remove a cancerous brain tumor known as a medulloblastoma at CHOP. He is at the hospital continuing treatment, she said.

“Originally the fundraiser was going to be to help his family with expenses. But his family said they wanted to pay it forward and have the Kortney Rose Foundation donate the money raised to research being done at CHOP,” Gillette said. “That’s one of the first times that I really felt I was making a difference.”

For more information about upcoming events, visit [thekortneyrose](#)

[foundation.org](#), the foundation’s website.