

Children remember as they play

THE COST: \$16,000 to build

THE PLAYGROUND: A 3-acre site

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OCEANPORT — Each time a pupil at Wolf Hill Elementary School utilizes its newly-built playground, the youngsters will be remembering the charming and playful spirit of Kortney Rose Gillette.

A playground dedication ceremony was held Sunday at the Oceanport school in memory of the 9-year-old who died April 27, four months after being diagnosed with Brainstem Glioma.

Kortney, who was a third-grader at the school was remembered as a vivacious, well-liked and friendly child with a contagious spirit for life.

Friends, family and school administrators gathered by the 3-acre site to see the unveiling of the sign, "Kortney's Playground," and to see the recently finished area in its entirety. The playground, located in the back of the elementary school, comes complete with swings, rockers, balance beam and slides, one of which is purple, Kortney's favorite color.

"Everyone in this community has had a hand in donating this playground," said Kortney's mother, Kristen Gillette. "Children

have donated their allowance and money, and people have participated in the event that helped fund the equipment. My idea of the playground is to keep Kortney's playful spirit alive through every child that plays here," she said.

The cost of the playground was \$16,000. The money to purchase material for the playground, which began construction in early January, was raised by the Kortney Rose Foundation, a nonprofit organization dedicated to raising funds for research and awareness related to the treatment and cure for pediatric brain tumors. The foundation was created out of the Caring for Kortney charity, established during the girl's illness.

Fundraising efforts included Kortney's Challenge, a 2-mile walk-run that attracted some 500 participants, a Lakewood Blue-Claws game and generous donations from the community.

A friend of Kortney since December 2005, fourth-grader Olivia Whitaker, 9, said the playground makes her feel more connected to Kortney.

"Now, everyone has a way to remember her all together," she said, adding that she was anxious to see the uncovering of the playground sign.



Rich and Kristen Gillette and their daughter Kasey, 13, attend the playground dedication at Wolf Hill Elementary School in memory of their daughter Kortney Rose Gillette.

(STAFF PHOTO: MARY FRANK)

Nine-year-old Abigail McLean was happy about the playground because she can somewhat be around her friend Kortney more all the time.

"It's really what she wanted," said Liza Amador, 9, whose mother Sherri Amador, did the caring for Kortney's fundraiser. "She really liked to play outside and have fun, and now that the playground is up, it's a better way to think of her."

Echoing her daughter's sentiments, Sherri Amador said that the playground is a tremendous

outlet for children to deal with grieving. The play area also has united the community, she said.

"We all think of her everyday," said Melinda McCarthy, Kortney's third-grade teacher. "She was very happy here at the school. So it is very appropriate and special to have this in her honor."

Wolf Hill School Principal Renee Bonin said, "It serves as a memorial, and it will honor all the kids who play there and serve as a way to remember her playful spirit."