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Best Bet Dancing, 7 p.m. Monday, Elks Lodge, Long Branch.

FOR LOVE OF KORTNEY

By CAROL GORGA WILLIAMS
STAFF WRITER

They came together — once again — for Kortney, moving dirt, spreading mulch, bringing Kortney's Playground one step closer to reality.

The playground, behind the Wolf Hill School, is named for Kortney Rose Gillette who was 9 when she died April 27, four months after being diagnosed with brain cancer.

Kortney was a pupil at Wolf Hill School, where playground equipment was vandalized last year. After Kortney's death, her family created The Kortney Rose Foundation, which grew out of the Caring for Kortney charity that had been established during her illness.

Kortney loved to play, especially on the swings at the playground at Wolf Hill School where she was a third-grader, and school officials said they were in need of more swings. The Kortney Rose Foundation is providing four more swings, which will be purple, one of Kortney's favorite colors.

Her mother, Kristen Gillette, said the family wanted to expand the foundation, with its first project raising

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From left, Rich Gillette of Oceanport works on Kortney's Playground with Oceanport firefighter Patrick Shaffery. The playground is named for Gillette's daughter Kortney Rose. (PHOTO: JOSEPH J. DELCONZO, SPECIAL TO THE PRESS)

Oceanport Police Captain Buzz Baldanza (left) and Police Officer Brian Burton work on Kortney's Playground.

Love

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money to improve the Wolf Hill School playground.

"Kortney loved to swing and slide and just play, play, play with her friends," her mother said in a news release. "I wanted to do something that would honor her playful spirit and give back to the community of Oceanport who gave so willingly of themselves throughout our ordeal. Kortney's Playground accomplishes that."

During the first week of the year, most of the new playground equipment was installed. (One piece still remains on order.) Then, on the weekend of Jan. 6 and 7, the community came together again for Kortney. On Saturday, volunteers, including Wolf Hill School Principal Renee Bonin, her husband and son, helped install the railroad ties that would surround the new equipment.

On Sunday, members of the Oceanport Police Department came out to spread mulch. Pete Macaluso from Absolute Quality Lawn Care in the borough donated the use of his backhoe

Kristen Gillette works on Kortney's Playground, named for her daughter, Kortney Rose, who died of brain cancer. (PHOTOS: JOSEPH J. DELCONZO, SPECIAL TO THE PRESS)

to make the job easier, Kristen Gillette said.

This response from the community has been typical, from the moment residents of the tiny town learned of the youngster's illness, Kortney's mother said.

"This town has embraced us," Gillette said. "Anything we needed, this town has been overwhelmingly supportive. I don't think you would find that in a larger town. I love Oceanport."

TO HELP

- For more information on a June 1 dinner dance at Fort Monmouth's Gibbs Hall and a replay of Kortney's Challenge set for Sept. 8, contact Kristen Gillette by e-mailing kortneyroseorg@aol.com or by calling (732) 222-1941 or (732) 859-3629.

To see the playground come together was a bittersweet thing for Gillette.

"It is exciting, but it is bittersweet, too," she said. "After I think of what a great accomplishment it is, I think of why I'm building it. It brings up a little sadness."

The money for the playground equipment was raised by the foundation. Fundraising efforts included Kortney's Challenge, a two-mile walk-run that drew more than 500 participants, a Lakewood BlueClaws game, and donations from local coaches and students, all raising about $12,000. But some $16,700 was needed, Gillette said.

GameTime, a playground equipment company, agreed to let the Gillettes pay the remainder over time, but that is when The Ryan Andrew Kaiser Memorial Foundation, based in Middletown, stepped in with the remaining $4,000. The foundation is named for Ryan Kaiser, the 6-year-old son of Andy and Lauren Kaiser. Ryan, who was born with congenital heart disease, died Jan. 25, 2003, and his foundation was set up not only to help parents of critically ill children but also to help provide children with safe places to play.

Gillette said she hopes to work closely with the foundation as plans for Kortney's work continues. After the playground is finished, the work will include raising money to support research and education for the treatment and cure of pediatric brain tumors, which is the leading cause of cancer-related deaths in children younger than 18, according to the foundation.

Already on the fundraising agenda is a June 1 dinner dance at Fort Monmouth's Gibbs Hall. A replay of Kortney's Challenge is set for Sept. 8. For more details about either event, contact Gillette by e-mailing kortneyroseorg@aol.com or by calling (732) 222-1941 or (732) 859-3629.