

## A tree grows in Stamford

Donations help children struggling with cancer after Greenwich family's loss

By Ken Borsuk  
Staff Reporter

When Joseph and Robin Kanerek lost their 15-year-old son David in 2000 after a long battle with leukemia, the grief was so difficult for them, the couple decided to make a fresh start and move with their daughter Sarah to London, England. But out of their despair came an idea that, for more than four years, has been helping children fighting cancer to cope.

The Kanerek family was the driving force behind David's Treasure Tree in Stamford Hospital's Pediatric Unit. The "tree" is actually a closet at the hospital with a door hand-painted by famed illustrator Judith Casley. The items painted on the door reflect the things David enjoyed and loved. Inside the closet are toys and games to be given as gifts for children fighting cancer. Everything from board games and dolls to action figures and DVDs may be found inside.

"I know this is something he would have loved," said Ms. Kanerek, a Greenwich resident. "We're doing several things in his memory and this was our beginning. It was the start of the healing process. Right after he passed we needed to get away because it was too painful to be here. We were able to start to heal and get help and talk about this and share our feelings. Day by day as a family, you get closer and closer together and then you start to think that's my mission right now, to honor his memory."

State Rep. Christel Truglia (D-145) is a longtime friend of Ms. Kanerek and visited the family often in London. Ms. Kanerek recalled that during a walk they had on the beach, the two hatched the idea that eventually became David's Treasure Tree.

"I remembered when he was first admitted to Yale-New Haven Hospital back in 1995 for evaluation and they had a toy closet there," Ms. Kanerek said. "David was in extreme pain and it was such a long, arduous process to get him diagnosed. The nurse took him to the toy closet and when they opened it up he just totally forgot he was ill. He just looked at all the gifts donated by the community and he looked like a kid at the holidays getting his gifts."

Ms. Kanerek, a registered nurse who worked as a diabetes educator at the hospital, has a long family history with Stamford Hospital. She's the daughter of Carl and Dorothy Bennett, who were so involved with the hospital that its cancer center is named after them. It was these connections that made her choose Stamford for the treasure tree's home.

After getting permission from Yale to duplicate the idea, it came together quickly. The treasure tree was dedicated on Nov. 21, 2003. The closet is in constant need of replenishment and that's where the community comes in through donations. Recently, a "truck load" of gifts was donated by the Darien Sport Shop. Club Chefs of Connecticut, which has raised more than \$31,000 since 2004 for the treasure tree, also gave \$10,000 for new



Robin Kanerek of Greenwich has helped establish David's Treasure Tree at Stamford Hospital as a tribute to her son David, who died of leukemia, and to help other children who are fighting cancer. The door of the closet, shown below, is painted with a giant tree containing all the things David loved.

toys. Jeff Perez, executive chef of the Fairview Country Club and a member of the Chefs Club, knew David and his family when he was a camp counselor at the club. Mr. Perez has been leading the way with donations since the tree was established.

Ms. Kanerek said the donations "warm her heart." She said the treasure tree wouldn't be possible without the help of those who donate or the nurses in the unit. As someone in the pediatric unit on a daily basis, Kathy Livolsi, the hospital's director for maternity, said the generosity of so many people and groups is "unbelievable."

Ms. Livolsi said donations have come from the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts, senior groups, schools and even children who give their own new birthday gifts to the hospital. Ms. Livolsi said that she's seen many patients get better only to come back to give presents to other kids because of how much they benefited from getting a new toy while they were sick.

"It's a happy distraction for the kids," Ms. Livolsi said. "This is a stressful experience for them and for their families and they're away from everything they know. They're not sleeping in their bedrooms. They're not going to school. They're not seeing their friends and they don't have their toys. This helps bring a normalcy to their life."

To make a donation, call Belinda Forte at the Stamford Hospital Foundation at 276-5995.

Ms. Livolsi compares the look on a child's face seeing the contents of the closet for the first time to them going



into FAO Schwarz and Ms. Kanerek said she's happy to see a legacy of happiness come from her family's tragedy.

"You do a lot of reflecting when you lose someone so close, and as long

as their memory is alive, and David's memory will always be alive in us, and you see what a positive impact this has, then I know we've done the right thing," Ms. Kanerek said.

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