

Giving Back



Nearly four years after the accident that claimed the lives of five Fairport High School students, one mom is working hard to raise money for charities and to keep the memory of her daughter alive

By Amy Cavalier

Stephanie Shirley (above) and her daughter, Katie Shirley, who died in 2007.

Stephanie Shirley remembers the exact moment when she knew that her 18-year-old daughter would not become a “was.”

Six months after Katie Shirley died in a car crash in June of 2007, along with four of her Fairport High School classmates, Stephanie began looking for a way to honor her daughter. At the encouragement of her twin sister, Sandra Monahan, she reached out to a local charity to see if she could help them in Katie’s name.

It all started with an e-mail that began, “Hello, my name is Stephanie Shirley.” Shirley said she couldn’t decide what to write next and remembers struggling whether to say “I am” or “I was” Katie Shirley’s mother.

“I froze and looked at the screen for a very long time, and then I put ‘is, dash, was,’” she said. “I decided right then and there, I didn’t want her to be a ‘was.’”

Stephanie was desperate to create something positive from the tragedy of losing her daughter. Since Katie’s Closet was started in late 2007, the group has raised more than \$125,000 in cash and donations to charities, including Fairy Godmothers and Daystar for Medically Fragile Infants.

In the process, Stephanie Shirley’s story has touched people throughout the country.

“Her heart is totally broken, but she works so hard to see life in what her daughter would have wanted. It says such an incredible thing about her as a parent,” said Coleen Emblidge, director of finance and development for Daystar.

Stephanie hasn’t watched television or read a newspaper in three years because, she said, it just hurts too much to hear about people in pain. With the reasoning that “you can’t hit a moving target,” Stephanie said, she tries to stay

busy.

“I am lost without my daughter,” she said. “It doesn’t get easier, it gets harder. I miss her every day.”

More than charity work

Katie’s Closet is about more than raising money for charity. It’s about sharing the story of Katie’s life.

For Katie’s Aunt Sandy, it’s also about the support of family, friends and strangers and how that support can help someone overcome unspeakable grief that is seemingly insurmountable.

For Stephanie, it’s been a way for her to carry on in the face of life-altering tragedy.

“I think that shows an incredible amount of strength,” said Pam Heiple, whose son took Katie to the prom. Pam now volunteers at Katie’s Closet.

“I think one of the reasons behind Steph doing this is because she needs to make sense of the loss and this is her way. Katie died, and that’s awful, but out of that, we’re helping some very needy babies.”

Stephanie and Katie’s father, Patrick, separated after the accident. With counseling, medication and support from friends and family, Stephanie said, she copes.

“But during the course of my work day and in the outside world, I have to put on my armor. It’s exhausting wearing it and by the end of the day it’s chipped away,” she said.

Stephanie cherishes the time she spends with the women who make jewelry and help run Katie’s Closet because she can be herself when she’s with them.

“The reality is, these women have kept me alive,” she said.

Fairy Godmothers

The first charity Stephanie got involved with was Fairy Godmothers of Greater Rochester, which provides prom attire for low-income high school students.

Stephanie felt it was a fitting cause because Katie had attended seven proms and felt that “every girl should be a princess for one day of her life.”

As a fundraiser, Stephanie took a leap of faith and ordered 600 bracelets inscribed with the words, “Live, Laugh, Love,” which was Katie’s philosophy of life.

“I hope you love them because you may be getting them for Christmas for the next 10 years,” Stephanie recalls telling her sister.

Those 600 bracelets didn’t last two weeks, and they had difficulty keeping up with the demand after that. Katie’s Closet sold several thousand bracelets, raising about \$25,000 for Fairy Godmothers, some of which was used to purchase a trailer, new and plus-size prom dresses and dress racks. They also conducted dress drives and helped Fairy Godmothers branch out into the suburbs.

Moving on

After a few years of donating the proceeds of Katie’s Closet to the Fairy Godmothers, Stephanie decided it was time to shift gears. Working with teenagers the same age as her daughter when she died just became too difficult. So she sought out another charity.

Katie loved babies, so Stephanie started looking for something small and local where they could make an impact. Her sister, Sandy, told her about Daystar for Medically Fragile Infants in Pittsford.

Katie Shirley was one of the five Fairport High School students who died in a collision June 26, 2007 when their SUV collided head-on with a tractor-trailer truck in Ontario County. They had graduated less than a week before the accident. Authorities said the girls were trapped in their SUV and were unable to escape when flames engulfed both vehicles. Four other girls following in a second SUV witnessed the crash. Authorities said the nine girls were traveling in the two vehicles to a family cottage on Keuka Lake when the accident occurred.

Stephanie stopped into Daystar one day to see how she could help. Coleen Emblidge, director of finance and development for Daystar, suggested she donate fabric for baby quilts and other small items like diapers and wipes. But Stephanie had much grander plans.

"For the day she walked into the door, I'll be forever grateful," said Emblidge.

Daystar serves children up to age 3 who suffer from illness and disease including Down syndrome, cerebral palsy, extreme prematurity and genetic and developmental disorders.

"There is no way a typical [child care facility] could take care of them," said Emblidge. "They come with a lot of adaptive assistive technology." The cost for care is \$176 per child, per day, Emblidge said, but parents are only charged \$45 a day. It's up to Daystar to make up the difference in cost, which they do through grants, fundraising, donations and some Medicaid funding.

Besides raising more than \$123,000 for Daystar, Stephanie and volunteers from Katie's Closet have purchased special equipment and volunteered their time.

Stephanie, however, has given much more than that, Emblidge said.

"I'm such a different person be-

heard about the group through word of mouth. Kate Bruce's son graduated with the "Fairport Five" and was good friends with all of them.

"It was such a hopeless time, such a horrible time when the girls died, and it took the place of us all sitting on the bleachers together," Bruce said of Katie's Closet. "Stephanie thinks she's the only one who gets any good from this. Since I've been making jewelry, my dad and sister have died, so it's just a good place to be. Life kind of does what it does, and so we're together, and it's a safe place to talk about things."

Volunteers from Katie's Closet have been improving their jewelry-making, and sales are skyrocketing. At Canal Days in 2008, they had to make 1,200 pieces in one month. They managed to do that and sold about \$9,000 worth of jewelry. The Park Avenue Festival five weeks later brought in more than \$10,000. And the following year, they sold twice that much at both festivals.

"The thought of losing a child is beyond comprehension, then the thought of her being able to raise so much money through 10-, 20-, 30-dollar bracelets and necklaces is almost equally unbelievable in a different kind of way," Stephanie's sister, Sandy, said.

In need of a home

For about the past year and a half, Katie's Closet has been headquartered in Fairport, in space donated by Renaldi Real Estate. Initially, the space was supposed to be theirs for two weeks, but that turned into a year and a half.

Each day they've been able to be there has been a gift, Stephanie said, because having space has allowed the group to meet twice a week to make bracelets. They began offering build-a-bracelet workshops in January of this year. They even sell make-your-own bracelet kits.

Recently, however, they had to move out of that space, and they are looking for a new home.

"We'll find one," said Sandy.

Divine intervention

Stephanie can list dozens of inspirational stories, coincidences and other acts of kindness and generosity that surround her daughter's charity. It's those things that keep her going every day.

"It's overwhelming, the people who have stepped into my life that I never in a million years would have imagined meeting. The way things have occurred, it blows me away," she said. "Katie is part of this. It's very clear to me. It's divine intervention."

Stephanie has reluctantly spoken to parents and students and to those who have lost a child.

"I always feel that I'm not sure I'm the right person," she said. "I'm three years down the road and the pain continues to grow. I might be realistic, but I'm not sure that's what people want to hear. What gets me through this is, basically, I try to stay pretty numb to it all, to the loss of Kate, to pretty much everything."

Being a parent, Stephanie thought, was the most difficult job in the world. Now, she realizes, losing the privilege of being a parent is far more difficult.

"It's not the natural cycle of life, and it's just not supposed to be this way," she said. "I had a different plan. I wanted to be a wife, a mother, a grandmother. At 53, I didn't expect to be sitting where I am today. Even though there are many rewards to what I'm doing, it doesn't take the pain away. It diverts me from a more reclusive life than I would have if I didn't have this."

Katie Shirley's Closet:

www.katieshirleyscloset.com

Daystar for Medically Fragile Infants: www.daystarhome.net/home

To order St. Pio Blend to benefit Katie Shirley's Closet, visit Evening Star Coffee Roasters: www.eveningstarcoffeeroasters.com/

Katie Shirley's Closet will have a display at the RepARTee Gallery, 2131 Five Mile Line Road, Penfield, in the "Nature and Nurture: Mothers, Daughters and Sisters" exhibit, which runs until Dec. 18. Hours are 1 to 5 p.m. Wednesday through Saturday, or by appointment. Call 585-586-5192 for details.

cause of Stephanie, and Daystar has never seen anything like that," she said, "but I'm personally thankful for her as a friend."

Bracelet boom

Before Katie's Closet got involved with Daystar, Stephanie had been ordering pre-made bracelets. But after a donation of 6,000 pearls to Katie's Closet, the idea surfaced about making handcrafted bracelets. The cost of the pre-made jewelry was going up, plus they wanted more variety.

So Stephanie sent out another email, and 24 people showed up. Marilyn Lipshutz of Studio 34 Creative Arts Learning Center taught a class on making simple bracelets.

The volunteers are friends of Stephanie's, and they are the mothers of sons and daughters who knew Katie. There's also a woman who just

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