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Michael's Feat creates a legacy for Puharic's infant son, helps families with ailing newborns

By Dan Zomack

Not only have Wall Township's Adam and Dana Puharic, both 38, turned personal tragedy into triumph, but they have helped countless area families get through some of the toughest days of their lives.

Having looked hardship in the face, the couple took the death of their infant son, Michael, and used the tragic event as the inspiration to create Michael's Feat, a nonprofit organization established to support, give comfort and ease the burden for parents caring for seriously ill newborns in Monmouth and Ocean county.

Michael Gerard Puharic was the couple's first child, born in the summer of 2000. Married in September 1997, Mrs. Puharic, like any expectant mother, was excited about her first pregnancy. However, when she was five months pregnant she learned the grim news — doctors informed her something abnormal appeared on the sonogram and their baby would not survive long after birth.

"There was only one option for us," said Mrs. Puharic. "We continued with the pregnancy."

Early on in the pregnancy, the Puharics were informed that Michael would face grave health problems due to trisomy 13, a chromosome disorder which severely limited a newborn's chances for survival. However, they elected to be the best parents they could for their son, for as long as he was with them.

Michael was born on July 29, 2000.

Just a few days later, on Tuesday, Aug. 1, 2000, Michael passed away peacefully in his parent's arms. Though his life was only 83 hours long, his will to live and the love and caring he brought out in people was something the Puharics wanted to live on.

The Puharics have since had three other children — Grace, 7, Grant, 6, and Victoria, 4.

It was a tough time for the couple. "Adam was the rock," Mrs. Puharic somberly stated, adding that she could not have possibly moved forward without her husband's — her best friend's — support.

It was also Michael's fight for his life which inspired the couple, and left them in awe.

Mr. Puharic pointed out though Michael may have lived for only 83 hours, the impact his life has had on improving the lives of others is "immeasurable."

Though she admits it was extremely difficult at times, with the help of family and friends, the Puharics were able to make it through the death of their son and emerge stronger and better people as a result of Michael's time on this earth.

At Michael's funeral Mass, the Puharics announced they would be collecting funds to assist other families who were raising a sick child, Mrs. Puharic explained. "We felt strongly there was this good deed done out there that we wanted to continue."

Mr. Puharic said that the kindness and assistance from hospital staff, friends and family in their time of crisis was something they wanted to pay back to the community at large. The Puharics wanted to carry on those acts of kindness in their son's name, and thus, Michael's Feat was established.

Michael's Feat provides support through education about seriously ill newborns and provides benefits to parents to assist in caring for their ill children.

The fund provides overnight bags stuffed with supplies — material items such as furniture and medical equipment to lighten their burden and assist families with their seriously ill children. Financial support, counseling and support through their online family center, and much more, is also offered to the families.

The bags have "creature comforts to make them feel good," Mrs. Puharic stated.

Some of the items included in the bags are hair brushes, slippers, disposable cameras, toothbrushes and gas cards.

The help Michael's Feat offers can also extend to the rest of the family, as well as other siblings, such as if they need to be fed or clothed.

Michael's Feat helps to fill in all of the gaps a family may need in their time of crisis, said Mr. Puharic.

"At this time in their life they are feeling helpless," and this is when the organization steps in, Mr. Puharic said.

"You really feel helpless at that moment," said Mrs. Puharic, who said giving the family some normalcy was a mission the organization wanted to achieve.

Over the years, she explained, Michael's Feat has grown to have a multidisciplinary board, made up of professionals, such as doctors and lawyers. They went from raising a couple of thousand dollars a year to an organization that has doled out over \$300,000 in benefits since its inception. "Michael's Feat is there to lend a hand," Mrs. Puharic said.

By keeping their organization small, Mr. Puharic noted, "It's a very personal charity."

Photos

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MICHAEL & DANA PUHARIC Photo by JOSEPH J. DELCONZO, STAR NEWS GROUP

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He added, "It's been able to be very organic."

Money is typically raised through a variety of fund-raisers and benefits held throughout Monmouth County. One benefit they recently had was a cut-a-thon at a Matawan salon and spa where proceeds went to Michael's Feat.

They also have their annual Spring Gala coming up, which will be held on Friday, March 20 from 7 to 11 p.m. at the Battleground Country Club in Manalapan.

Manasquan resident Kristin Belger will be the Honorary Chairperson of the 2009 "Hope for the Flowers" gala.

Mrs. Belger is a professional graphic designer who has used her talent to transform the image of Michael's Feat. The Puharics came to know Mrs. Belger and her husband, Jeff, after their son Nathaniel was born in 2005.

Nathaniel was born as a micro preemie, said Mrs. Belger. He arrived 15 weeks early and weighed one pound and 11 ounces at birth.

Mrs. Belger said Nathaniel fought for his life for seven- and-one-half months before he lost his courageous battle. His life was spent in Jersey Shore University Medical Center [JSUMC] and the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia [CHOP].

Since then, she has donated countless hours of her creativity on Michael's Feat print materials.

When asked to be this year's chair, she replied, "From the phone cards we used during our son's seven- and one-half months in the NICU to Dana's comforting presence and generous donation given to us at Nathaniel's wake, Michael's Feat will forever be embedded in our hearts, assisting us through the most difficult time in our lives. The dedication and tireless efforts of everyone at Michael's Feat is evident when speaking to those families they have touched."

Mrs. Belger said she is amazed by the immediate help the group is able to provide those in need, and is still surprised by how fast help can come to a family.

"I feel privileged and honored to be a part of them," added Mrs. Belger.

Area hospitals have Michael's Feat liaisons, including Monmouth Medical Center, JSUMC, and most recently, CHOP.

"We recognized there's a need there," said Mrs. Puharic, explaining that many Monmouth County families travel there for their care. The liaisons are there to lend the organization's support if needed and inform the parents of what help is available to them.

Michael's Feat was able to help improve the quality of life for the family of those affected by emergency births with the Family Resource Center Room, which is for parents with seriously ill infants in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit [NICU] at Monmouth Medical Center. The room provides a comfortable environment for parents and siblings to rest and regroup while visiting their ill newborn at the hospital. Some features of the room include a resource library with medical dictionaries, magazines, a computer with e-mail access and tools to create care pages to keep friends and family connected, a play area complete with toys, books and movies to occupy siblings, as well as coffee and snacks.

The room was created to give families caring for seriously ill newborns a "living room" away from home, according to the Puharics.

"We wanted to create some sort of normalcy in their life," said Mr. Puharic, and the resource room helps to bring that stability.

"It's a room people gravitate to now," said Mrs. Puharic. She said the room has also proven to be a comfortable space for families to spend time together when they are in the hospital during the holidays.

A Manasquan artist, Melissa Dayton, donated her time and craft by painting a large mural in the room. She also donates prints to Michael's Feat to help raise funds for the group.

"People who lose infants are very close to my heart," said Mrs. Dayton, who, along with her husband Chip, have seven children.

For more information about Michael's Feat, or to find out how to help, please visit www.michaelsfeat.org.

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