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Emerson girl lives on through charity softball tournament

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Dave Morgan recalls coaching his daughter Stephanie's T-ball team and, years later, watching her strike out opposing softball sluggers from the mound at Emerson High School, counting these among his most cherished "proud dad" moments.

Stephanie was natural at the sport and understood its intricacies from a young age, Morgan said. When he watched her dispatch a batter, or confer with her catcher about how to pitch to the next one, he understood that the hours he had spent accompanying her to game after game or practicing with her in the backyard had helped her find her passion.

But that passion and promise were extinguished in April 2015 when Stephanie was ejected from the front passenger seat of a sport utility vehicle that skidded and then flipped over multiple times on Hasbrouck Avenue. Stephanie, a senior only two months from graduation, was pronounced dead hours later at a hospital. The 17-year-old driver, whom classmates described as one of Stephanie's closest friends, was charged with juvenile delinquency.

The accident stunned Emerson and devastated Stephanie's family. But her father couldn't help but smile earlier this week as he looked out at the green and golden baseball diamond at Hillman Field, where Stephanie once played and where Morgan's family — and hundreds of volunteers, friends and Emerson residents — will take to the diamond today for the first "Shine on for Stephanie" softball tournament. The event will raise money for an art scholarship that has been created in her honor.

The Morgan family, with the help of several close friends, channeled their grief into something positive, Dave Morgan said, and the Emerson community helped them summon the confidence and motivation to do so.

"As the months have gone on, we just tried to think of ways to keep her name alive," Morgan said. "This feels good. I'll be out there in the morning and I'll know that when I'm out on the field she will have been there. She walked down that pathway. She was born in this town, and this is her hometown."

The path to creating a scholarship in Stephanie's honor wasn't easy, Morgan and his daughter Taylor, 21, said in the family's first interview since Stephanie's death.

The details of her death remain vivid more than a year later, Morgan said — the terror that crept through his body when he heard the phone ring late at night; running up to the crash site; going to the hospital; having a doctor ask him to sit down before breaking the news of her death.

"That evening will be with me for the rest of my life," he said. "It runs through my head. It's like what you see on TV."



MICHAEL KARAS/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Dave Morgan Sr. and his daughter Taylor hold a picture of Stephanie Morgan at Hillman Field in Emerson.



CHRIS MONROE/SPECIAL TO THE RECORD

Emerson High School Principal Brian Hutchinson speaks to those who gathered at the school on Friday in memory of former student Stephanie Morgan.

The news of Stephanie's death spread quickly through Emerson, and the community rallied around the Morgans. A candlelight vigil at the crash site drew more than a hundred people. At her wake, buses were needed to shuttle hundreds of mourners to the funeral home from a parking area. Stephanie's fellow students at Emerson High School wiped away tears as they lined Main Street to say a final goodbye as the hearse drove past the school. The school's baseball team wrote her name on the underside of the bills of the caps that they wore when they won the North 1, Group 1 title in May of last year.

As the family watched all of this unfold, Morgan said he and Taylor knew they wanted to figure out a way to honor Stephanie in a way that reflected her passions.

"The outpouring of support ... I've never seen anything like it," Morgan said. "I said to myself after everything happened that I need to do something for her, to keep her name alive."

Morgan, Taylor, his son, David Jr., and his wife, Mary Beth, huddled with a group of close friends starting earlier this year. They met a local restaurant and sketched out ideas, finally landing on two things: Stephanie's passion for softball and art.

The tournament will feature 10 teams — including one that Dave and Taylor Morgan put together, a team of Emerson High School teachers, and squads representing Emerson's police and fire departments. The high school softball team also will compete.

Through donations and the \$25-per-person registration fee for the tournament, Morgan said the family has raised about \$10,000 that they will use to fund the scholarship and perhaps donate to other causes in Emerson.

While her family was well aware of Stephanie's ability on the softball diamond, Taylor Morgan said they are still learning more about her growing interest in art. Dave Morgan said Stephanie may have pursued art after high school.

"Art was something we really started to find out more about Stephanie after everything happened," Taylor Morgan said. "Random art pieces started to turn up, and we were like, she was that good?"

Stephanie's high school ceramics teacher told the Morgans about her growing passion for art and how she would spend hours in the art studio helping her classmates. One of Stephanie's creations, a ceramic sculpture of a large rooster, won top honors at an art competition in Philadelphia after she died. Her family accepted the award on her behalf.

As Stephanie's budding art talents came into sharper focus, Dave Morgan said the idea of a softball tournament to help fund an annual scholarship for an Emerson High School art student began to take shape.

This year, the recipient of the scholarship will receive \$500. A committee including Dave and Mary Beth Morgan, Stephanie's aunt and Stephanie's ceramics teacher judged the applicants, and a winner is expected to be named soon.

"It's all to raise some money for future artists at the high school," Dave Morgan said.

Emerson continues to rally around the Morgans. Franklin Praschil, a 15-year-old Boy Scout, is building a memory garden to honor deceased borough residents, with Stephanie to be prominently featured. The garden is expected to break ground in August.

Earlier this year the borough's Shade Tree Commission continued its annual tradition of planting trees in memory of residents who have died. Stephanie was honored with a tree in Washington Oak Park.

And on Friday, Stephanie's classmates from the Emerson High School class of 2015 dedicated a bench in her memory outside the school.

The Morgans say this support sustained them as they began setting up the scholarship and tournament.

"It's been since Day One everyone has been asking us what they can do and how they can help us," Taylor Morgan said. "If it wasn't for everyone surrounding us and helping us, it would have been difficult to even get there. This never would have happened. The constant support — people asking us how we are, stopping by, sending letters and cards — it helped and it's still continuing."

The Morgans expect a "mix of emotions" today when they take the field with the hundreds of people who have signed up to play in the tournament. But in the end, Dave Morgan said, he knows Stephanie would be happy to see everyone spending a day outside playing softball and supporting the arts.



Stephanie Morgan

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“She would be thrilled to know something like this would be going on in her name,” he said. “I visit her often and I talk to her and I let her know what is happening. But she loved this kind of stuff.

“A year later, we are still mourning, but we are trying to do a positive thing and keep her name alive.”

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