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Family establishes foundation to award scholarships and other donations to students in need

By Anthony Caciopo

The late Jim Mikulski was, by many accounts, a loving guy.

“He was always smiling,” said Kathy Grady, a longtime family friend.

“He had a heart of gold, loved his family so much. He really was a great man,” she said.

Grady and more than 125 family members, friends and other supporters gathered recently at Zachary’s Grill to honor a former Palos Heights resident who took his own life just over six years ago at the age of 28.



“He was a pretty peaceful guy, loved to give back, especially to his family,” said his sister, Kathy Diaz.

“On road trips, we’d play in the back, fight like brother and sister, but we always got along,” she said. “I miss him.”

Mikulski died Aug. 2, 2013 in California where he had moved only a few months before. He was married and had two stepchildren. The reason he took his own life isn’t necessarily clear.

“He had a lot of back pain that was really never diagnosed and I think that weighed on him,” said his mother, Maureen. “He moved out to California (when his company relocated there from Oak Brook) so that was probably stressful. I’m just guessing. We don’t really understand.”

Suicide rates have increased in nearly every state from 1999 to 2018, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. More than

38,000 people in the U.S. die each year from suicide and it is the 2nd leading cause of death for people 24-35 years of age, exceeded only by unintentional injuries.

Those who commit suicide at any age are male at nearly four times the rate of females, according to the National Institute for Mental Health. Females have suicidal thoughts more often, however.

But any real or perceived difficulties of Jim’s life seemed to be far from the minds of most attendees at the benefit, which included live music, raffles, food and plenty of good cheer as the crowd focused on what’s ahead in the wake of such a breathtaking tragedy.

Raised on the Southwest Side of Chicago, Jim attended St. Daniel the Prophet elementary school in the Garfield Ridge community and St. Laurence High School in Burbank.

He loved to place baseball, recalled his father, John, who remembers acquiring a pitching machine to use with Jim.

One day, on the diamond at Shepard High School near the Mikulski's Palos Heights home in Westgate, Jim clobbered nine balls over the outfield fence.

He had a creative side, too.

"Jim painted our whole basement, picked the colors out," said his mother. "He was good with colors. I wasn't sure about them, how they would all work together, so he made a scale model of the basement, painted the walls the color that he wanted and showed it to me."

"I still have that model," she said.

His dad said Jim loved car trips, but curiously the destination seemed secondary to the actual journey.

"We went to Washington, D.C., turned around and came back," said John Mikulski, smiling. "We'd go out west to Montana, stayed overnight, stopped in Nebraska on the way back. We had fun doing that."

Certain road trips, however, were with a very specific purpose: visiting baseball stadiums.

"We went to Cleveland, Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, even saw a game in the original Yankee Stadium," said his dad.



Little Matt Dunne, 3, reaches to drop a ticket into a jar for a raffle prize at the Jim's Bridge to a Brighter Future benefit, an event in memory of Palos Heights resident James Mikulski who took his own life in 2013. With Matt are his brother Willie, 4; grandmother Colleen Dunne (left) and aunt, Pat Dunne. (Photo by Anthony Caciopo)

And now, Jim's memory lives on not only in the minds of those who knew him, but of total strangers, because of a charitable organization that bears his name, the James F. Mikulski Memorial Group, Inc.

"Thank you for sponsoring our squad and allowing us to earn cool medals," reads one of many notes in a three-ring binder that was on display at the Jim's Bridge to a Brighter future fundraiser.

The note was signed "Love, Visitation Kids."

Another reads "With Natalie, Elizabeth, Alonda and parents, from the bottom of our hearts, thank you."

A third has a strikingly detailed student drawing of a heart with flowers emerging.

And then there are thank you cards, each with multiple names, and those, too are from appreciative students.

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“This (Jim’s death) could really turn dark, but no, we’re going to try to get something positive out of it,” recalled his mother, Maureen.

“At the time I was working at the University of Chicago and I’d pass by my alma mater, Visitation School (Garfield Boulevard just west of Halsted Street) every once in a while and say ‘Someone really needs to help these kids.’”

“We started out giving them scholarships and helping them with after-school programs, buying athletic equipment, helping them with transportation on field trips, summer camp,” Maureen said.



Bill Norris watches the prize wheel spin at the Jim’s Bridge to a Brighter Future benefit held recently at Zachary’s Grill in Palos Heights. Scholarships are among the good works funded by the James F. Mikulski Memorial Group, Inc., a charitable organization named in his memory. (Photo by Anthony Caciopo)

“We expanded to another school and we expanded to another place. Hopefully it’s making a difference in their lives because it’s not easy where they’re at,” she said.

According to a pre-event flyer posted at Zach’s promoting the most recent fundraiser (the fourth annual), more than \$75,500 has been granted/donated to help children; 33 scholarships have been awarded and 20,000 pounds of clothing, books and hard goods have been donated, among other accomplishments.

“The purpose of The James F. Mikulski Memorial Group, Inc. is to establish a legacy of sharing, caring and helping others in memory of James F. Mikulski,” according to the organization’s website.

It’s a mission that struck a chord with Zach

Kubiak, host of the annual fundraiser since its inception. This year’s was the biggest so far, he said, This year’s event, and it featured raffle prizes and other donations contributed by a long list of businesses and individuals.

Kubiak owns Zachary’s Grill, 13415 S. Ridgeland Ave. and Zach’s On Tap, 12231 S. Harlem Ave., both in Palos Heights.

“We all clicked the first eight months that I was open,” said Kubiak, who opened Zachary’s in April, 2015.

John and Maureen Mikulski were customers, which led them to inquire about the potential of Zachary’s hosting what would then be the inaugural fundraiser. Soon after, Kubiak hosted their daughter Kathy’s wedding, too.

“Another reason I like this fundraiser is that everyone nowadays has dealt with suicide, it’s unfortunate to say,” said Kubiak.

My wife and I are high school sweethearts and we’ve known a couple people who have committed suicide, from high school and as we’ve gotten older,” he said.

“I’m sensitive about the issue and as long as the proceeds are going to where they need to be, to helping and educating youth, then that’s all that’s important,” he said.

Donations are accepted, and needed, year round. The James F. Mikulski Memorial Group, Inc. is entirely volunteer-run and expenses are limited to two percent of revenue, according to organizers.

“I’m so glad we’re keeping his memory alive,” said Kathy Grady, the family friend.

More information can be found on Facebook and at www.jfmmemorial.org.

Free, confidential help for people struggling with thoughts of suicide may be obtained 24/7 by calling the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK (8255).