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Children of 'Ski' start fund for 9/11 families

10:56 AM By Brittany Wait



Photo credit: Handout

Wearing a necklace bearing his ashes in a small container, his fingerprint on a medallion and a symbolic open heart pendant, tears dripped down Crystal Gajewski's face as she reminisced about her father.

Mark "Ski" Gajewski, a former U.S. Marine and professional welder who volunteered for three months in the cleanup efforts at Ground Zero following the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center, died last December from a rare form of lung cancer.

"He had such a huge heart," she said. "He was a 6-foot-4, 284-pound biker,

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but once you spoke to him you knew he had a heart of gold and was really a big teddy bear.”

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In his honor, Crystal, 29, of Holbrook, and her brother Sean Gajewski, 26, of East Patchogue, founded Ski’s Open Heart Foundation to help Sept. 11 first responders and their families. The foundation’s launch party was on June 11 at the Irish Times Pub, where about 155 people attended. They raised about \$5,500.

“Dad was the breadwinner of our family and now our family is stuck with paying the medical bills,” said Crystal, who is a project manager for Concrete Nation in Smithtown. “Our reason for this is to help other families in the same situation.”

After 9/11, Mark Gajewski continued to help out in other ways, big and small. He was involved in 9/11 charities such as the FealGood Foundation, and spent much of his time after being diagnosed with lung cancer in 2010 volunteering for multiple children charities like Toys for Tots and Tuesday’s Children, Crystal Gajewski said.

When Hurricane Katrina hit, her father loaded up his truck with diapers, water, blankets and canned foods, among other things, and drove down to Louisiana to help out.

Sean Gajewski, who works at Cullen and Dykman law firm in Garden City, said that after his father died, family and friends came over to the house to tell stories and everyone asked how they could help the family out. That’s when his sister came up with the idea of starting the foundation.

“If my sister puts her mind to something, she pretty much does it,” he said.

Mark’s wife, Debbie Gajewski, who enjoyed sitting on the back of her husband’s motorcycle on runs, described her husband of 32 years as someone who would give the shirt of his back and who meant everything to her.

“People just fell in love with him everywhere he went and my daughter wanted to follow in his footsteps to help everyone,” said Gajewski, 54, of East Patchogue. “We wanted this [foundation] so that people would always remember him for the things he did.”

Crystal added, “My dad did so much for so many people. He instilled a lot in me and my brother and now we want to continue his legacy. I don’t want other families to feel the burden that we felt. The pain of losing a loved one is enough.”

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