

fund highlight



SAMANTHA LEE ZAJAC MEMORIAL FUND, *established 2001*

When a child dies suddenly, families respond in many ways.

Family, friends and neighbors responded to 8 year old Sammy's death with shock and generosity. They sent cards and flowers, attended Sammy's funeral, and made memorial donations.

With the help of a friend, the Zajacs learned about the Chester County Community Foundation, which enabled them to create the Samantha Lee Zajac Memorial Fund.

Denny Zajac explains, "We wanted to commemorate our daughter Sammy's special personality and interests. We also wanted to give the community the opportunity to participate in creating a tribute, to help with the healing process. And we wanted to say

'thank you' for all those who welcomed and supported Sammy during her lifetime."

The Zajacs designated Westtown-Thornbury Elementary School as the initial recipient of proceeds from Sammy's Fund, as it came to be called. They formed a team at the elementary school and developed guidelines for a memorial project that would reflect Sammy's interests and values. Sammy's Place, an outdoor educational center, was dedicated in fall 2002. Nestled into a hillside, Sammy's Place was built with passion and drive. A place for contemplating, learning, questing, exploring, dancing, and singing, Sammy's Place is a wonderful tribute.

At the dedication ceremony, inspirational speaker Pat Croce to set the tone and speakers paid tribute to Sammy's great attitude and enthusiasm. Her oldest sister Lindsay spoke of what it was like to know Sammy, "whose heart was bright, cheery, and large



like the sun.” Lindsay says her sister taught her to “live life to the fullest” and to try her hardest; that “we should laugh with people, not at them, and that we should always enjoy learning new things.”

But this was only a beginning.

Notes Carla Zajac, “Our daughter Sammy loved creative movement and music. She had great rhythm. Music was a very big part of her life. And Sammy loved dancing; it was another channel for her uniqueness.”

The Zajac family begin creating another charitable project—one that would help other children with limitations in how they can move, to benefit from and enjoy dancing. Shining Stars Adapted Dance Camp, a camp for children with mobility limitations, was launched at West Chester University in summer 2007. The second camp was held at Dianne Mathews School of

Dance Arts in summer 2008. Shining Stars is geared towards girls and boys between the ages of 5 and 12 who have physical disabilities. Children using wheelchairs, crutches, walker and braces are welcome. The experienced staff, including professional dance instructors, adapted physical educators, and dance volunteers, creates a great and unique dance experience.

In creating Sammy’s Fund and making grant awards to build Sammy’s Place and establish the Adapted Dance Camp, the Zajac family shows that people can transform grief into a contribution to life. Their projects honor Sammy in ways that remind us that every child brings unique gifts to this world—that each child leaves a legacy.

Thanks for Vanessa Christman of Bryn Mawr for her contributions to this article.