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Sports

Children deliver message of hope with fund-raiser

By BOB GILLESPIE
Senior Writer

KILLIAN OWEN, NO doubt, would approve.

Imagine: a bunch of 30- and 40-ish mothers wearing white and red T-shirts, playing something resembling flag football while their husbands dance on the sidelines, decked out as cheerleaders in skirts and newspaper-stuffed bras and blonde wigs.

All of it to help raise money and gain attention for the fight against pediatric cancer.

This event is a bunch of things that Killian, a happy, sports-loving 9-year-old who died in 2003 after a four-year battle with leukemia, got a kick out of, all rolled into one.

"He definitely would have enjoyed this," Clay Owen says of his son. "There are a lot of activities you get involved in as a family with a child with cancer, and Killian was always at the front. He couldn't wait to participate.

"He had a spark about him," Owen says with a chuckle, then a sigh. "I can see him right out on the front lines of this."

Today at Heathwood Hall, parents and fifth-graders will stage the inaugural "Kickin' Kid's Cancer to the Endzone." The goal is to celebrate Killian's memory in a way he would have wanted: playing sports, having silly fun and promoting Coaches Curing Kids Cancer, the organization founded by Clay Owen and his wife Grainne (pronounced GRON-ya), who live in the Atlanta area.

Among the football-playing moms will be Elizabeth Owen, wife of Clay's brother, Paul. She suggested the game as a way to help her in-laws' cause, one born out of a family's grief, but one that also has grown to be, they say, so much more.

"Elizabeth and Paul came up with (the football game fund-raiser) all by themselves, and I think it's a wonderful way of doing it," Grainne Owen says. "It's a real grass-roots thing we're doing, and people just want to help."

Not just adults, either. Heathwood's 59 fifth-graders voted to make the game and fund-raiser their annual community service project, after Elizabeth Owen and her fifth-grade son, Heath, spoke to them about Killian. The youngsters generated \$2,200 in donations of \$2, \$25 and \$50.

Grainne Owen's original idea — to ask youth sports teams in Atlanta and around the nation to forgo

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coaches' end-of-season gifts and donate the money to children's cancer research — has generated between \$70,000 and \$80,000 since September. She says it brings in "\$1,000 a day" via www.curingkidscancer.org.

"It's coming in faster than we can keep up with," she says from the couple's Marietta, Ga., home.

The Wall Street Journal, New York radio stations and even Oprah Winfrey all have written or talked about CCKC. Still, Elizabeth Owen believes the Heathwood effort is more typical of what the organization is about.

"One of Heath's friends gave the \$2 he was going to pay for (the school's) 'Dress Down Day,'" she says. "Others begged their parents and grandparents, or raided their piggy banks."

Says Paul Owen: "We hope this will continue with the kids. We'd like to see this go on forever."

AN IDEA BORN OUT OF GRIEF

Paul, now 47, and Clay, 45, grew up in North, working in their father's drugstore and playing small-town pickup sports of all sorts — though Paul, laughing, insists his younger brother was "the academic, not athletic at all."

Both attended USC. Paul became a lawyer. Clay, with a degree in journalism, worked for several newspapers (including The State) and WIS-TV before going to work in 1987 for CNN. While assigned to England, he met and married Grainne, a native of Ireland, and then came home to Atlanta where they had four sons: Pierce, now 13, Finian, 7, and the twins, Killian and Garrett, 11.

Clay, an Atlanta Braves fan, passed his passion on to his sons. The boys played ball in the back yard, and plans were made to build a batting cage. "They loved the sport so much," Grainne says.

Meanwhile, Paul and Elizabeth married, settled in Columbia and had two sons, Heath, 11, and Justin, 7. The families stayed in touch, but were not especially close — until one day in December 1999 when Paul's mother, Maxine, who still lives in North, called him with shocking news.

"She said Killian (then 5) had been diagnosed with leukemia, and the blood test had come back positive," Paul says.

Immediately, the two families' lives changed. Paul and Elizabeth spent whole weeks in Atlanta with Killian's brothers, while his parents shuttled back and forth to a series of hospitals.

Doctors told Clay and Grainne that Killian's type of cancer had an 80 percent cure rate. For nearly three years, he underwent chemotherapy and eventually went into remission. But in July 2002, six months from the scheduled end of his treatment, the leukemia returned.

"One of the things they don't tell you is, if you relapse, the (survival) chances drop to 10-20 percent," Grainne says.

Still, she and Clay were convinced their son could beat the odds; in his twin, Garrett, they had a perfect bone-marrow transplant match. After the transplant, doctors told them the "magic marker" was 100 days; if Killian reached that date, his chances were good.

"Ninety days later, he had another relapse," Grainne says. This time, she says, "The doctors sat us down

and said, 'Go make some memories.'"

So they did. The families went to Disney World. Heath, Killian and Garrett, all the same age, spent hours together playing video games.

"Killian would play until his thumbs bled," Heath says. "He got upset once when he lost a game to Robbie Gordon's girlfriend. He hated to lose."

Gordon, the NASCAR driver, became close to Killian. There were visits with Sammy Sosa, his favorite baseball player, and Andres Gallaraga, a cancer survivor. Then-Falcons coach Dan Reeves and quarterback Michael Vick called regularly. And when Killian underwent experimental drug treatment at the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda, Md., he got a phone call from then-Redskins coach Steve Spurrier, wishing him well.

For a time after Killian died, in his father's arms — his parents placed a baseball, bat and glove in his coffin — the family was consumed by grief. But last summer, Grainne decided: enough.

"I was sitting with our other three sons, miserable that we were coming up on the anniversary (of Killian's death)," she says. "I thought, 'Killian would hate me sitting here being upset. He hated seeing me cry.'"

"Then I thought of the coaches thing. I said, 'I bet we could make it work.'"

The Coaches Curing Kids Cancer concept, in fact, came from Bob Cox, Pierce Owen's baseball coach, who before Killian died had donated his end-of-season gift from players' parents to pediatric cancer research. In August 2004, Grainne talked to officials at Children's Healthcare of Atlanta, where Killian had been treated for three years, about her idea and asked for their help.

From there, she says, the plan took off like a rocket. Last fall, through Atlanta-area teams and coaches, the group raised nearly \$50,000. One donation came from a youth baseball team in Columbia, which Paul coached.

Driving the effort is the fact, family members say, that about five percent of American Cancer Society funds are targeted for pediatric cancer research.

"The whole (Bethesda) experience taught me how close we are to a breakthrough in treating childhood cancer," Grainne says. "(But) companies don't want to spend money on just children; there's not as much money to make as with adult cancer.

"I asked the hospital, 'If I can get money for research, can you promise it'll be used only for kids?' They set up a special fund, we got the Web site running, and then came the first donation."

She laughs. "Since then, it's just exploded."

A MESSAGE OF HOPE

This is what gets you the most about this: it's the kids.

The Coaches Curing Kids Cancer effort in Columbia has become a community project. Coaches who get involved receive CCKC T-shirts provided at cost by Orangeburg-based W&B Enterprises. For donations of \$25 or \$50, donors get shirts, green plastic wristbands (similar to the yellow Lance Armstrong "Live Strong" bands) and membership in the "Green Bandana Club," inspired by the bandanas that cancer patients wear.

when they lose their hair.

The green bandanas were created and donated by Palmetto Promotions, whose owner, Chip Prezioso, has nephews at Heathwood Hall.

"We want to stress the hopeful nature of this," Grainne Owen says. "It's not a sad thing. Killian was a happy child, and we want that to come through. It's a message of hope."

For all the adult involvement, though, the special part of the local project has come from the 10- and 11-year-olds at Heathwood.

Teacher Jo-Ann Brooks, a survivor of breast cancer, says her students "are used to adults doing these things. But this project, they can feel they own it."

When Heath Owen asked classmates to become part of the family's work, "I saw leaders emerging," Brooks says.

Such as Akida Leby, son of Columbia artist Larry Leby, who says he did chores and raided his Christmas money to donate \$25. He also talked his father into being a water boy for the football game, telling him it would be part of Akida's birthday present.

"It makes me sad when kids die from cancer," he says. "It's so awful. Every day, I think about people with cancer."

Rob Smith, 11, who donated his "Dress Down Day" money, proudly says, "I'm a fanatic about helping people out."

Powers Burnette, 11, says donating "gave me an excited feeling." Foster Krebs, 11, who had met Killian through Heath Owen, says, "I feel like I can make a difference in kids' lives."

Empowerment, especially for 11-year-olds, can be a very uplifting experience.

Today's football game, pitting the Red Blood Cells team against the White Blood Cells team, will be a small affair, meant to raise awareness and inspire giving rather than drawing attendance. Still, youngsters say, who knows where their project might lead?

Andrew Voss, 10, who had a neighborhood friend who died recently from cancer, likes to dream on a large scale.

"I think we'll start some big thing across America," he says. He pauses, then adds, "well, maybe not that big but big for 10- and 11-year-olds."

You know that Killian Owen would agree with that.

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