

From tragedy, celebration

StarLight Gala benefits groups born out of deaths and suicide

By Robb Murray

Free Press Staff Writer

MANKATO - Inside this room - where harp sounds floated around like audible dreams, where evening gowns turned heads and where hugs were as plentiful as kids on a Sibley Park sliding hill - it was hard to imagine the agony that made the evening possible.



Pat Christm

Linda Janavaras (left) and Barb Rischmiller each suffered the loss of teen-aged sons in the 1990s. They are two of four founding members of One Bright Star, a group that offers financial assistance and a family support network to people who have suffered the loss of a child.

Unless, of course, that agony is yours.

"When you lose a child," said Irene LePage, whose son Marcus died several years ago in an apparent suicide, "there's nothing more earth shattering in your life."

LePage was at the Kato Ballroom Saturday night along with about 300 others. The official title of the event, StarLight Gala: An Evening of Elegance For the Children, was a joint fundraiser for two local groups: One Bright Star, which offers financial assistance and a family support network for people who have lost a child, and the Yellow Ribbon Suicide Prevention Program, a group that offers counseling and help to individuals or families affected by suicide.

This was the first time the two groups joined for this type of fundraiser. They hope it won't be the last.

It was, as the name of the event implies, an elegant affair. Well-dressed locals perused a silent auction table full of leaf blowers, framed art and sports memorabilia. Attendees sipped punch, nibbled on fine desserts and watched a dancing display.

But the real beauty, attendees say, was the sense of celebration at an event with such tragic beginnings.

Barb Rischmiller's son, Brandon, died in a sports accident. He was a senior on the Mankato West track team. While preparing for the state pole vault finals, he fell on his head. He died in 1991.

A few years later another Mankato West athlete, John Janavaras, died from meningitis. His mother Linda said it took 18 hours from the time her son got sick until he was pronounced dead.

The women met not long after Janavaras' death. And soon they, along with two other grieving mothers, Jan Backlund and Vicky Meyer, formed an informal group to support each other. In 1998, they formed One Bright Star, a group to help people suffering the loss of a child.

Members wear pins in the shape of the group's symbol, a star with one of the five points longer than the others. Stars worn by parents who have lost a child also have a tiny diamond embedded into the star's longer point. When people ask about the stars, the women are happy to talk about their sons.

"We want people to understand he's in our thoughts every day," Rischmiller said.

Both women say it does get easier to learn to survive without the child they lost, but they'll never fully heal. Their goal now is to help ease the pain of anyone else mourning a child. That's why widening the support network through events such as Saturday's gala is so important. It's also important, they said, to stay positive.

Said Janavaras, "We want this to be a celebration."

LePage's son was a standout football and basketball player, class president, tall, good looking. But he was nervous about going to college. He was having trouble with his girlfriend. And he'd gotten a speeding ticket. No one is certain whether his death was intentional or not.

Whatever it was, she said, having a group like Yellow Ribbon around would have been nice. She wanted someone or something to turn to for help. Her friends and family offered support, but it was hard to find someone who could empathize.

"It really helps to be able to talk to people who have gone through the same thing," LePage said. "A person needs that kind of help immediately."

Suicide is something, she said, that society still has trouble talking about. Events like this one raise awareness in the hopes that more dialogue about it may help prevent it from happening to someone else's family.

* * *

For more information visit www.onebrightstar.org, or www.yellowribbonmn.org