

Mom carries on son's mission

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Teresa Jemio looks over photographs and remembrances of her son, Christopher, who died in 2005 on Christmas Day of a cerebral hemorrhage.

A Christmas fund designed to help orphans in Mazatlan, Mexico, has been renamed 'The Christopher Fund' in his memory.

WILKES-BARRE, PA – Teresa Jemio stands in front of her Christmas tree, holding the last ornament she bought for her son, Christopher.

"I bought that the year that he died. And I never got to hang it. I just took it out of the box this year," she said wistfully.

The snowman ornament wearing a New York Yankees sweater is just one of the many reminders Teresa keeps of her son, who was 27 when he died of a cerebral hemorrhage on Christmas Day in 2005. Since then, Theresa's been keeping her son's memory alive by telling a story of his simple generosity that, after his death, snowballed into a happy Christmas each year for orphans in Mexico.

A simple kindness

It started with a delivery of soccer balls and cleaning supplies. But it didn't stop there.

Christopher Jemio lucked out in 2005 when he won a free trip to the destination of his choice from his employer, Travelocity. Before embarking to Mazatlan, Mexico, with two friends, the Wilkes-Barre resident decided to make his trip worthwhile by donating supplies to an orphanage there.

An avid soccer player in his school days, the 1997 Coughlin graduate knew the orphans in the futbol-passionate country would appreciate the soccer balls. And cleaning supplies were always needed. He told his friend Eileen Lindbuchler of his plan to visit the orphanage. She later told his mother, Teresa, that was when she knew she had fallen in love with Christopher. The two began dating after the trip.

Christopher, his best friend Steve Flannery, and Eileen arrived in Mexico in spring 2005. They searched for an orphanage they had seen online, but when they couldn't find it, decided to make the donation to the Ciudad de Los Ninos orphanage in Mazatlan, located on the west coast of central Mexico.

While there, Christopher and Eileen had their picture taken with Sister Ofelia, one of the nuns who ran the orphanage. Teresa Jemio knew nothing of her son's selfless gesture until she looked through his photos and asked the nun's identity. Teresa was stunned by her son's generosity to the orphans.

"I had no idea they were going," she said.

His legacy might have ended there.

A sudden loss

About eight months after the trip to Mexico, on Christmas Eve, Christopher was returning from a family holiday party in Mountain Top with Eileen. As they left, he told his girlfriend he had the beginnings of a severe headache.

"He said, 'My head is starting to hurt. How about driving the car?'" Teresa recalled her son asking Eileen.

Eileen stopped at a gas station for medicine and water, but by the time she returned to the car, Christopher was burning up. He yanked off his shirt and poured the water over himself in an effort to cool off, Teresa said.

Christopher was unconscious by the time they reached the hospital. Teresa and her son, Rob, rushed there after Eileen called to alert them to Christopher's condition. Doctors determined Christopher had suffered a massive cerebral hemorrhage. There was no chance for survival.

"By the time she got him to the hospital, he was not responsive at all," Teresa said. "He didn't have any brain activity."

Christopher died on Christmas morning.

Carrying on his mission

Christopher and Eileen had plans to return to Mexico and work at the orphanage. Although their plans died with Christopher, Teresa found herself willing to take up the torch her son lit.

Teresa knew there were more orphans needed, so she and Eileen did some research and discovered the Tres Islas Orphanage Fund, which donated funds to several orphanages in Mazatlan.

They spoke to Donelle Manton, the fund's founder, and sent a check for \$250, along with the story of Christopher's trip to Ciudad de Los Ninos orphanage. Manton called them back with the news the money was enough to buy Christmas dinner and a Christmas tree for each orphanage.

Manton also asked Teresa if they could change the name of the annual Christmas fund to "The Christopher Fund." Now, each year, the fund pays for Christmas dinner for about 123 children in the five orphanages through the generosity of Christopher's family and friends.

In April 2008, Teresa visited Mazatlan to volunteer at the orphanages. While there, the volunteers spruced up the orphanage by painting and gardening, and took care of whatever else needed to be done.

"That was way out of my comfort zone," Teresa said of her solo trip to a foreign country. "But it was a wonderful experience."

Many of the children are not technically orphaned, but their parents are unable to take care of them due to drug or alcohol addiction, Teresa said. Seeing their smiling faces and how much they appreciate what they have was life-changing, Teresa said. She also had her picture taken with Sister Ofelia, echoing the picture her son took with the orphanage administrator during his trip.

"(The children) want to know that somebody's cares about them. That makes a difference in their lives," she said.

An inspiration to others

Teresa repeated the trip the past two years, sharing Christopher's story with family, friends and those she met on her journey. At first, she was reluctant to make the details public on a grand scale.

However, she realized that sharing her son's legacy is not only beneficial for The Christopher Fund, but it may inspire others to do good as well. Many of Christopher's friends have taken his example to heart, doing what they can to volunteer or donate money to good causes.

"That one instant in someone's life, led to this, and to that," she said.

Christopher's friends even came together to help the family pay for Christopher's gravestone. They held a benefit at Shooters, a bar just a few blocks from the family's home on Scott Street, in January 2006. Local bands Original Sin and 1428 performed in their friend's memory.

Christopher's life touched many of his friends and family, who came en masse to pay their respects at his funeral in Holy Savior Church. The outpouring of love and concern they have for Christopher and his family is comforting for Teresa, a reminder that her son was well-loved and his memory cherished.

"I always thought he was so shy. Oh, how I was wrong," Teresa said.

Even years after his death, Teresa finds mementos and flowers laid on her son's grave - including a picture of Christopher at the beach, walking toward the shoreline holding his cat, Carmel. The cat, in poor health, didn't have long to live, but Christopher wanted it to see the shore before it died, Teresa said. She forgot about that moment until she found the photograph propped against the gravestone.

"His friends still remember him, still love him," she said.

The gift of life

Christopher's giving spirit also lived on in the five people who received his organs after his death.

Her son knew the importance of organ donorship, Teresa said. Christopher's father, Roberto, had suffered from Wilson's Disease, and underwent a liver transplant in 1989. Although Roberto died only a few months later, the family knew that donated organs could mean the difference between life and death for someone else. Christopher's corneas, liver and kidneys were transplanted into five different recipients.

"We knew how much hope we had for my husband," Teresa said.

Teresa also cherishes the small signs that give her the strength to keep her son's memory alive.

During her travels, Teresa stops by churches to request a Mass for her son. At St. Mary's Basilica in Phoenix, Ariz., the Mass for Christopher was scheduled for May 9.

"May 9 was my mother's birthday. She died of a cerebral hemorrhage. Same as Christopher. She was 35," Teresa said.

She also learned that Christopher gave a coworker the book, "The Five People You Meet in Heaven," by Mitch Albom, the year he died.

"I've had lots of experiences like that," she said. "Just so many little things. What do they mean? You take it for what you want it for. You take it for what you need at the time."