

# 'Love for Vinnie' swells community's heart

## Effort to assist ailing teenager

By Mike Latona  
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — He arranged a night on the town for a group of senior citizens last spring.

He was the only boy on the Aquinas Institute girls' volleyball team last fall.

Upon receiving the diocesan Hands of Christ Award — given to high-school seniors who have demonstrated outstanding service — from Bishop Matthew H. Clark in October, he gave a big hug to the bishop while all other recipients settled for handshakes.

In his parish, he played Christ in a Living Stations of the Cross last Good Friday and has also assisted with religious education and Bible camp.

And even as Vinnie Ferrari laid in his bed at Rochester's Strong Memorial Hospital last Wednesday evening, Feb. 8, after nearly losing his life just a couple of weeks earlier, his enthusiasm had not diminished one iota.

"Fun is my main objective," he said with a laugh. "When I'm old and gray, I want to have fun."

That unsinkable spirit has created a legion of friends for Vinnie throughout his 18 years. Yet he may never have known how many people he's touched until this past month — a time when they've willingly returned that spirit.

If loving support alone could cure a young man of cancer, then Vinnie would be the healthiest person on earth.

As it stands, Vinnie's future is uncertain as he battles an inoperable brain tumor discovered only a month ago.

Signs of the illness may have already been present around the time Vinnie transferred to Greece Olympia High School in late 1994 after falling grades had forced him to leave Aquinas, where he had been a senior.

"I think now you can look back and say it was related — that the tumor was growing from late summer and he couldn't keep up his grades," said Vinnie's mother, Emily.

On Jan. 9, just days after Vinnie had begun complaining of severe migraine headaches, he was diagnosed with a malignancy. Over the next two weeks he underwent life-maintenance proce-



S. John Wilkin/Staff photographer

Bill Gurney (far right), Boy Scout Troop 70 scoutmaster, speaks to the media during a Feb. 7 press conference at Rochester's St. Andrew's Church announcing the 'Love for Vinnie' fundraising drive.

dures, and nearly died on two occasions. Yet his condition has now stabilized, and although he is continuing radiation treatments he was deemed stable enough to return home this past Sunday, Feb. 12.

As his mother drove him from the hospital to their Greece home, Vinnie stopped briefly in the Aquinas parking lot for a homecoming quite different from any ever seen on the football field.

Upon hearing of his arrival, scores of people pressed up against the windows — and even streamed out into the parking lot — to catch a glimpse of Vinnie before he headed back to his house.

It was a scene reminiscent, perhaps, of the Beatles' first appearance in the United States — which would be an apt comparison with Vinnie since it was also the Fab Four which declared, "The love

you take is equal to the love you make."

The well-wishers were assembled at Aquinas for a colossal pasta supper which raised funds to help cover Vinnie's medical costs. Nearly 1,000 people attended the function, which was the biggest event to date in the "Love for Vinnie" Campaign.

This effort has garnered support from dozens of community organizations, including Our Lady of Perpetual Help Church, Vinnie's parish; Boy Scout Troop 70 at St. Andrew's Church, where Vinnie is an Eagle Scout; and Aquinas.

Individuals have also helped the cause with various donations in other ways. According to Bill Gurney, Troop 70's scoutmaster, "Love for Vinnie" has already doubled its original goal of \$5,000. Nearly 1,000 people attended the bene-



Vinnie Ferrari and his mother, Emily, were all smiles the night he became an Eagle Scout this past spring. For his Eagle project, Vinnie escorted a number of St. Ann's Home residents to a play at Aquinas Institute.

fit dinner, he said.

"I'm amazed. I'm in shock, I think," exclaimed Karin Marlett, 23, as she stood in the crowded Aquinas cafeteria. Marlett, a longtime friend of Vinnie's, embroidered a 4-by-8-foot "Love for Vinnie" poster that was on display at the pasta dinner as well as a press conference at St. Andrew's Church on Feb. 7, when the fund drive was announced.

Vinnie himself has been a little in awe of this outpouring of love.

"People tell me about the spaghetti dinner and it's unbelievable. I never knew I had so many friends," he said on Feb. 8 as he was surrounded by hospital-room walls full of get-well wishes. Meanwhile, he clutched another gift — a stuffed bear displaying the message "I love you" — as he spoke.

Other than frequent memory lapses, Vinnie is able to communicate clearly and can move short distances with the aid of a walker.

"He's always been a very strong, resilient young man," said Vinnie's father, Vincent.

Vinnie said he plans to take things "one day at a time" now that he's home from the hospital, yet one of the first things he'd like to do is "go to Mass and say thank you (to God), I guess because I'm still alive. I was very borderline; very close to not being here."

"I know we've walked real close with God lately," his mother agreed.

**EDITORS' NOTE:** Donations for Vinnie Ferrari are still being accepted. Checks may be made out to "Love for Vinnie" and sent to Boy Scout Troop 70, St. Andrew's Church, 923 Portland Ave., Rochester, N.Y., 14621.

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