

FEATURE

New Scouting badge pays tribute to fallen member

By Kathleen Schwar
Assistant editor

Chrissy Teora, 11, is working to earn a Girl Scout badge that honors one of her best friends, Gabriella Marie Napodano. The badge is called "Gabby's Way."

"It makes me feel good to remember her like that," Chrissy said of her friend, who died April 30, 2001, of a rare childhood bone cancer.

The new Scouting badge is intended to teach the girls how they can help a friend or loved one battling a childhood illness.

Gabby's Troop 522 at St. Helen's in Gates has been writing to organizations for information on epilepsy, muscular dystrophy and other diseases.

The question arises: Would Gabby herself have gone for such a badge? Well, Chrissy said, "She might be kind of bored writing a lot. She's not a sit-still person."

Gabby, the only child of Jim and Karen Napodano, was a fifth-grader at St. Helen's School, which she had attended since kindergarten, according to Principal Mary Beth Sullivan. She had undergone two major surgeries in 14 months, a bone-marrow transplant and chemotherapy, Sullivan said. "She was in school when she wasn't in the hospital."

"She was a good student. The kids loved her," the principal said. Gabby loved to laugh, Sullivan noted in a talk she gave at her funeral. "Her classmates have recalled many phone calls when Gabby would use different accents or silly voices, just to make everyone laugh."

"She has shown us how to live life no matter what we may be asked to endure — and there is no doubt that she knew how to do this," Sullivan said. In being so social, Gabby "helps us to see how our God wants us to celebrate our life — to laugh and love as Gabby taught us."



Photo courtesy of St. Helen's School

Gabby Napodano (left) and friend Nicole St. James posed for this photo on Valentine's Day 2001.

And she liked her nickname as long as it wasn't used to suggest that she talked too much. Yet Chrissy said, "She was very active, she never ever stopped talking."

The girls loved to shop. Gabby liked to wear lime green and other bright colors, and baggy jeans. She wanted to be a singer, and liked singing on her karaoke machine. She'd decorate her home and have friends over for "CFF," crafts, fun and friends.

Gabby's namesake junior badge is available to fourth- through sixth-graders, primarily, in the Girl Scouts of Genesee Valley. The council covers Monroe, Genesee, Livingston, Orleans and Wyoming counties.

"Gabby's dad is the one who presented

the idea to us," said Melanie Phillips, program specialist for the council. "The message is one of hope, more about children living with the illnesses, not dying with the illnesses."

"This is the pilot year for the program. We'll take it through the end of summer," she said. From there, Scouts will help evaluate the program, she said. Then the council will make a presentation to the national Girl Scouts office in New York City and suggest the badge be available nationally.

Jim Napodano helped write the badge requirements. Of 10 activities, at least six are required: Write down what you know about a childhood illness, and how you can help support children your age who have

an illness such as cancer or diabetes. Ask a support group to send you information about the disease and about services it offers. Invite a guest speaker to your troop meeting and participate in a group discussion. Help a support group. Make a collage about family members helping each other. Find out about careers devoted to childhood illnesses. Make posters publicizing events sponsored by family support services. Deliver a verbal report about working on this badge. Write an article about the badge, illness and perspectives you've gained. Reflect on what you've learned.

"The girls were very enthusiastic about doing this badge based on Gabby's life, and they know her parents," said Carol Kramer, their troop leader. "I think having watched my daughter (Abby Stallworth) go through it with her classmates, what impressed me was the support from the school and the Strong Memorial Hospital people who came and spoke. They demystified what cancer was, what Gabby was going through, gave the opportunity to ask questions, and explained what they might see when Gabby returned." She was on crutches and had lost her hair, Kramer explained, but the school and speakers helped prepare the children for that.

"That's part of the purpose of this badge — for kids who haven't had this experience, (to know) lots of kids have childhood illnesses," the troop leader added. "People live with these diseases and they go on. Sometimes, as in Gabby's case, they do die, but a lot of them live with illness a long time and live nice, full lives."

Gabby herself didn't talk much about her cancer, Chrissy said. "But she didn't let it slow her down or anything."

And by the time the Scouts reach badge requirement No. 4, helping out a support group, Chrissy said, "She'd probably like that. She's really social."

Despite illness, Elmira teacher kept students smiling

By Mike Latona
Staff writer

Not even a critical illness could tear Patty Bennett away from her third-grade students at Elmira's Holy Family Primary School.

Ms. Bennett quite literally taught until the day she died. She worked the entire school day Nov. 15, 2001, passing away that night at Arnot Ogden Medical Center from complications due to cancer. She was 50 years old.

Her death was deeply mourned by the community at Holy Family, where co-workers described Ms. Bennett as a dedicated teacher with noticeably creative talents.

Mary Kelly Baker, who also teaches third grade, recalled that Ms. Bennett was known to bring in her son's football jersey and use his uniform number to illustrate a math problem. Other times, she would dress up like Groucho Marx, complete with bushy eyebrows. "She had all kinds of costumes," Baker said.

Connie Brady, school principal, added that Ms. Bennett would dress in a white lab coat and present herself as "Dr. Math." Brady also noted that students looked for-



ward to sitting in Ms. Bennett's tiny rocking chair and holding one of the teddy bears from her vast collection.

Joyce Kane, a second-grade teacher, recalled that Ms. Bennett was a Buffalo Bills fan who liked to display football memorabilia in the classroom. "When Flutie Flakes came out, she added them to her Bills 'shrine,'" Kane recalled.

Kane also said that whenever a large snowstorm was predicted for Elmira, Ms. Bennett would tell her students to "snow-dance" so the heavens would drop enough snow to force school to be canceled. "If we did have school, she'd tell them they didn't dance hard enough," Kane remarked.

Baker added that Ms. Bennett's class would often make impromptu visits to her own classroom, usually to perform some kind of skit. "She would bust in with her class at least twice a month," Baker said. One St. Patrick's Day, the surprise was returned. "We busted in, and we had learned this Irish jig," said Baker, who noted that Ms. Bennett was proud of her Irish her-

itage.

The end result was a teaching style that proved highly effective, Brady said: "She inspired her students, and they did their very best to please her."

"She always believed you should have fun while you learned. She made sure they liked school and felt good about themselves," Baker said. "She had a zest for making children want to learn," Kane agreed.

Mary Jane Cerio, school secretary, recalled that Ms. Bennett's enthusiasm extended to her alma mater, Notre Dame High School, where she frequently attended sporting events.

"She was a great gal to have in your corner, and it was evident to everyone in the stands," she said. Cerio added that when Ms. Bennett went out in public, her former students "would always flock to her and acknowledge her."

Ms. Bennett touched her co-workers as well as the students. Baker described her as a great friend, and Cerio said that "she was always someone you could lean on, in touch with your feelings. She could always turn your day around with a little short note."

Ms. Bennett's caring extended beyond

Elmira. During the 2000-01 school year, she organized a card- and gift-giving campaign for a young Rochester girl, Katie Ruberti, who has leukemia.

"I took everything to the post office, and that had to weigh 20 pounds," said Joe Kosmicki, Holy Family Schools' director of development/public relations. Katie, who is Kosmicki's grandniece, traveled to Elmira last spring to visit Ms. Bennett's class.

However, Cerio remarked, Ms. Bennett was not the type to draw attention to herself. In her final weeks, it was obvious that Ms. Bennett was quite ill "but she wouldn't let on," Cerio said.

Brady observed that Ms. Bennett "was a very, very private person," and Kane said, "To this day I don't know how she kept going as long as she did."

Baker said continuing to work in spite of her illness typified Ms. Bennett's intense dedication, saying that with very few exceptions over the years, "She never took time off."

"She'll be very sorely missed, for a long time," Cerio commented.

Born Patricia A. McGurgan, Ms. Bennett graduated from Notre Dame in 1969 and went on graduate from D'Youville College in Buffalo. She had taught third grade ever since beginning her tenure with Holy Family in 1983.

Ms. Bennett's funeral Mass took place Nov. 20, 2001, at St. Patrick's Church. Interment was at Ss. Peter and Paul Cemetery.

She is survived by her sons Shaun (Julie) and Timothy; daughter, Monica, and special friend Aric Brown; father, Hugh McGurgan; brothers Thomas, Joseph (Debra) and Kevin (Laura) McGurgan; sister, Kathleen (David) Barnes; sister-in-law Patricia Evans McGurgan; grandchildren, Chadden, Sydney and Griffin Bennett; and nieces, nephews and cousins.



Give us facts. Give us faith.

Children need more than an academic edge to succeed in this world. They need a moral one as well. That's why in our curriculum they go hand in hand. Call 585-529-9524 to learn how we can help you give your child the most complete education possible.

Catholic Schools
We teach it all.