

Teen's battle with cancer inspires family to continue fund-raising

By KATE SANTICH
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

Sarah Szafranski was only 16 when she died Monday, but she had already managed to help raise more than \$70,000 for cancer research and touch the lives of hundreds of people, many of whom she never met.

The Forest City teenager, who succumbed after a long battle — first with Hodgkin's disease and then leukemia — had made it her final wish to launch an endowment for cancer research. Her father, Bob Szafranski, and sister, 8-year-old Amy, have spent weekends and some weeknights for the past 3½ months planning fund-raising events and knocking on doors to spread word of Sarah's mission.

"She's my hero," Bob Szafranski said. "She was supposed to have lived six weeks and she held out three months. And when she did pass, she had a smile on her face, even though she was in a lot of pain. She fought it every bit of the way."

Sarah died at home, in her mother's arms.

She was first diagnosed in February 2000 with advanced-stage Hodgkin's disease. Although she endured seven weeks of intense chemotherapy — and was cured of Hodgkin's disease — the treatment gave rise to a secondary cancer. "Last Thursday was her last good day," her father said. "Maybe in her mind she was ready. Maybe she knew she didn't have much time left."

Still, her mission continues. From the start, the goal has been to raise \$100,000 — enough to make the endowment self-sustaining while providing at least \$5,000 in grants. The money, Sarah had decided, would support not only research on childhood cancers, but also the study of pain-management for young patients and the volunteer programs that give cheer to kids in the hospital.

A benefit barbecue lunch will be held Friday from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. at Winter Park Blue-

print, 300 N. Orlando Ave., Maitland. An enormous banner now hangs from the building, featuring Sarah's picture before the leukemia. In it she is smiling radiantly, as usual.

Family and friends said it is the way they will remember her.

"I hope someday I grow up to be like her," Bob Szafranski said.

Tax-deductible contributions for Sarah's cause can be made by writing a check to the Orlando Regional Healthcare Foundation and putting "Sarah Szafranski Memorial Fund" in the memo section. Checks can be mailed to HHCP, Attn: Sarah Szafranski Memorial Fund, 222 W. Maitland Blvd., Maitland, FL 32752.

The Healthcare Foundation administers various endowments, allowing all the money from Sarah's fund to go directly to research and charity.

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