

BEST OF THE BEST

BEST WAY TO HELP MAKE A DIFFERENCE

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Every once in a while here in our "BEST OF THE BEST" section, we make special mention of a person or charity or similar organization that truly embodies what it means to be the Best of the Best. With that in mind, we felt compelled to draw attention to one of the most exemplary charity events we've ever attended, and one for perhaps the noblest of causes – children with cancer. It's called the Michelle O'Neill Foundation, and they just recently had their twelfth annual Michelle O'Neill Volleyball Tournament last Sunday, and their most successful to date.

life is how a handful of special people choose to turn their sorrow and grief into missions of purpose and goodwill. In Michelle's memory, this is precisely what her family have done – her parents, Carol and Richard; her sisters, Caryl Ann O'Neill-Niven and Jackie O'Neill-Walsh; and her brother, Ricky – in establishing the Michelle O'Neill Foundation, a not-for-profit organization to benefit children with cancer.

Since its inception in 1997, the Foundation has made distributions to families of children with cancer; sponsored campers and their parents to Big Sky Camp in Bozeman, Montana; and

lent support to the Make-A-Wish Foundation, Ronald McDonald House, and other oncology organizations. Its signature event, smiley faces and all, is its annual Michelle O'Neill Volleyball Tournament, an event which grows in popularity every year.

in the sight of these 100 flags flapping in the breeze up and down the boardwalk truly fills the heart in a way befitting Michelle's legacy and pride in her community. A tip of the cap, for sure, to Jimmy Tolfree for making it all happen every year.

Twelve years hence, this year's incarnation of the Michelle O'Neill Volleyball Tournament was probably the most difficult to pull off. Tropical Storm Hanna was ripping through the Eastern seaboard ravaging baseball schedules, the US Open, and a whole host of weekend travel plans. But give Carol O'Neill and her organization a ton of credit here – they were able to put their rain date of September 7th in effect without barely a ripple. In fact, they still managed to bring in an astounding 278 teams! (Of which, by the way, Best Team Name – by a long shot, if you ask us – was awarded to the "Pulling Muscles For Michelle" squad...)

As Carol O'Neill tells it, "The communication to our pre-registrants and to all who look forward the entire year to celebrating the day with us was amazing. The news regarding the rescheduling was accomplished by posting an announcement on our website, as well as on the Long Beach website, mass emails were sent to our online registrants and, with the help of several friends sending emails to their vast email databases, people learned that Sunday would be a 'go.'"

Meanwhile, over in Flushing Meadows, absolute chaos with regard to Shea Stadium and the U.S. Open. It just goes to show you what a little organization and clear communication can do. But then, families who've been forced to live with cancer already know a lifetime's worth of resilience and flexibility. "It's a prime example of what the true spirit of Long Beach is," says Carol O'Neill. "People reaching out and helping one another. I wouldn't want to live anywhere else."

With a big boost from sponsors like OUTBACK STEAKHOUSE, who served up complimentary burgers and chicken sandwiches, and GLACEAU VITAMINWATER, who provided free drinks for all, last Sunday's event seemed the perfect atmosphere to maximize one's appreciation of this gorgeous stretch of beach, whether you were participating in the tournament or just a fan.

And as far as the numbers go, despite the threat of Tropical Storm Hanna, the Foundation was able to make good on its promise that each year be even more successful than the



previous one, because with more than a thousand participants, and a host of donations from across the board, the Michelle O'Neill Foundation was once again able to raise more than \$100,000 for the cause.

For the O'Neill family, as much as this special day will always be about Michelle, its equally memorable legacy is in the number of children it helps. And when those the Foundation has helped are actually on hand to say thank-you – young ones like Amanda Rae and her Mom or little 2-year-old Maggie Kelly – it always puts all the anxious weeks of preparation into perspective.

"It's a lot of work," says Michelle's sister Jackie O'Neill-Walsh. "But it's always worthwhile. Absolutely."

"Michelle's favorite saying was 'carpe diem,'" says mom Carol. "And that is just what we did. We seized the day, we had a fabulous time, and we raised lots of money for the kids."

If you can find it in your heart to reach out and help children with cancer, why not contact the Michelle O'Neill Foundation by visiting them on their website at www.MONFoundation.org.



From left to right, Carol O'Neill and her daughters Caryl Ann O'Neill-Niven and Jackie O'Neill-Walsh. These six smiles are what the Michelle O'Neill Foundation is all about.

This is one of the sad, sad ones, folks. And yet, it's also one of the most beautiful ones, too. Even for a first-time visitor such as myself, it would be impossible not to be impressed, not to be moved, not to be absolutely in awe of the annual Long Beach event that is known simply as the Michelle O'Neill Volleyball Tournament, but which in actuality is so much more.

Michelle O'Neill, raised in Maspeth and Long Beach, was one of those beautiful bright lights of a girl taken from us all too soon. Diagnosed with a brain tumor (medulla blastoma) while just a senior in high school at Christ the King, Michelle fought valiantly for years, undergoing radiation and chemo again and again, but unfortunately, succumbed to the disease at the age of 24. To all who knew her, she was the perennial smiley face – in fact, it was the signature she affixed to all her letters, poems, paintings, a spirit and a sensibility which is now her enduring legacy.

Perhaps one of the most inspiring things we may ever encounter in this

"The first year was the hardest," says Caryl Ann O'Neill-Niven, surveying the hundreds of volleyball participants lining up to register last Sunday. "My sister wasn't even gone a year, I think it was more maybe just to help us get through it... but we managed to raise \$17,000."

"The ironic thing about it, my sister didn't really have a connection to volleyball... but she just loved this beach so much. It was really a way to celebrate this beach." Celebrate it is quite the understatement, because no matter where you look on this gorgeous Sunday, nets and nets of volleyball games, 4's and 6's, as far as the eye can see. In fact, even further.

As you probably know, the community of Long Beach is a close-knit one where our flag flies proudly, and in great numbers. But perhaps ne'er so proudly as it does on the day that by rights ought to be known in the community as "Michelle O'Neill Day." Flag after flag graces the boardwalk from Grand Avenue to New York Avenue and then some. To take