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by Connie Nye Shapiro '80



Laura Kramedas Munts '80 helps children celebrate the lives of their mothers

Every year, Chelsea Rose takes a trip to the beach and gets to bounce on her hotel bed. Jakia goes to the mall for back-to-school shopping. Max and Madi plant flowers. Simple acts, yes. But they are traditions that have powerful influences on the lives of these children whose mothers have died from brain cancer, heart disease, or breast cancer.

Twenty thousand children under the age of 18 in Pennsylvania's Delaware Valley suffer such losses. From aids to accidents to various forms of cancer, mothers are dying and leaving behind children and families, some already fatherless, overwhelmed with grief.

According to Mommy's Light Lives On Fund, each one of these children is "three times more likely than the general population to gravitate to either end of the social spectrum" as either a juvenile delinquent or a significant community contributor. To tip the scales in favor of a positive outcome, a healthy grieving process is essential, says Executive Director and Board President Laura Kramedas Munts '80.

Mommy's Light Lives On Fund is an organization created to help children, ages 3 to 18, cope with the death of a mother by celebrating her life with a tradition established while she was living. Usually the major caretakers in the family, mothers provide security, routine, and predictability. When a mother dies, families struggle with so much that oftentimes the children's need to maintain a bond with their mothers is overlooked.

The job of Mommy's Light is to help children keep that bond intact through the process of identifying and carrying out annual traditions. From baking cookies at Christmas time to cheering at NASCAR races, children are supported in a positive manner by commemorating their mothers' lives through these simple activities.

Since its first child started planting flowers in the spring of 2000, Mommy's Light has grown enormously with Munts leading the way. A retired attorney staying at home with her children, she wasn't looking for a new career. But her close friend Mary Murphy changed everything.

In 1997, Murphy, realizing she was dying of a rare form of cervical cancer, became determined to establish an organization that would help maternally bereaved children celebrate their mothers' lives. Before passing away just a few months later

and leaving her 10-year-old son motherless, Murphy solicited Munts's help incorporating Mommy's Light Lives On and promising to carry out her vision.

The first few years were a struggle, admits Munts, as the original board of directors grappled with how to turn the mission into tangible application. With degrees in law and applied psychology, Munts was equipped for, though overwhelmed by, the challenge.

Continually inspired by Mary's presence, even after her death, and with great support from her husband and children, Munts persevered. With organizational guidance from the Make-A-Wish Foundation, an initial board of directors committed to Mary Murphy, numerous guidance counselors, and some early successful fund-raising, Mommy's Light got under way and there's been no looking back.

Max, the organization's first child served, has been participating in a flower-planting tradition provided by Mommy's Light for six years and is now joined by his younger sister, Madi, as well as their stepfamily. Along with Max and Madi, Chelsea Rose, and Jakia, 97 other children are now celebrating the lives of their deceased mothers annually with the help of Mommy's Light.

As a public charity that provides services free of charge, Mommy's Light (www.mommyslight.org) is funded strictly by donations and fundraisers. Annual events such as golf tournaments, 5K runs, and dinner auctions are orchestrated to help cover the average cost of \$350 per child to facilitate the traditions. Though the cost is small, the impact is immeasurable and gaining recognition.

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Make a donation that will help children keep alive traditions or simple pleasures they shared with their mothers.

Edie Huggins of NBC-10 News in Philadelphia honored Munts as a "Huggins' Hero" in 2004. And Maybelline recently honored Munts as one of four recipients of its "You Make a Difference" contest advertised in *People* magazine. Presented with a \$10,000 award, Mommy's Light staff and volunteers were also treated to a benefit concert featuring Delta Goodrem, a 21-year-old Australian singer and cancer survivor.

Despite the growing success of the organization, Munts acknowledges the difficulties of dealing with families of dying mothers. As hard as the circumstances are, she maintains that it is also a privilege to work with these courageous families and to walk such "sacred ground."

Mommy's Light has created a sense of community for Munts and her staff as well, shaped by the many families and volunteers that bring the program to life. Though Mommy's Light now serves 101 children, Munts reflects on the 19,900 other

Delaware Valley children coming to terms with their mothers' deaths without the help of an organization like Mommy's Light.

With continued growth, Laura hopes to be able to provide a network of caring, responsive people to help all maternally bereaved children honor and stay connected to their mothers through treasured traditions.

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