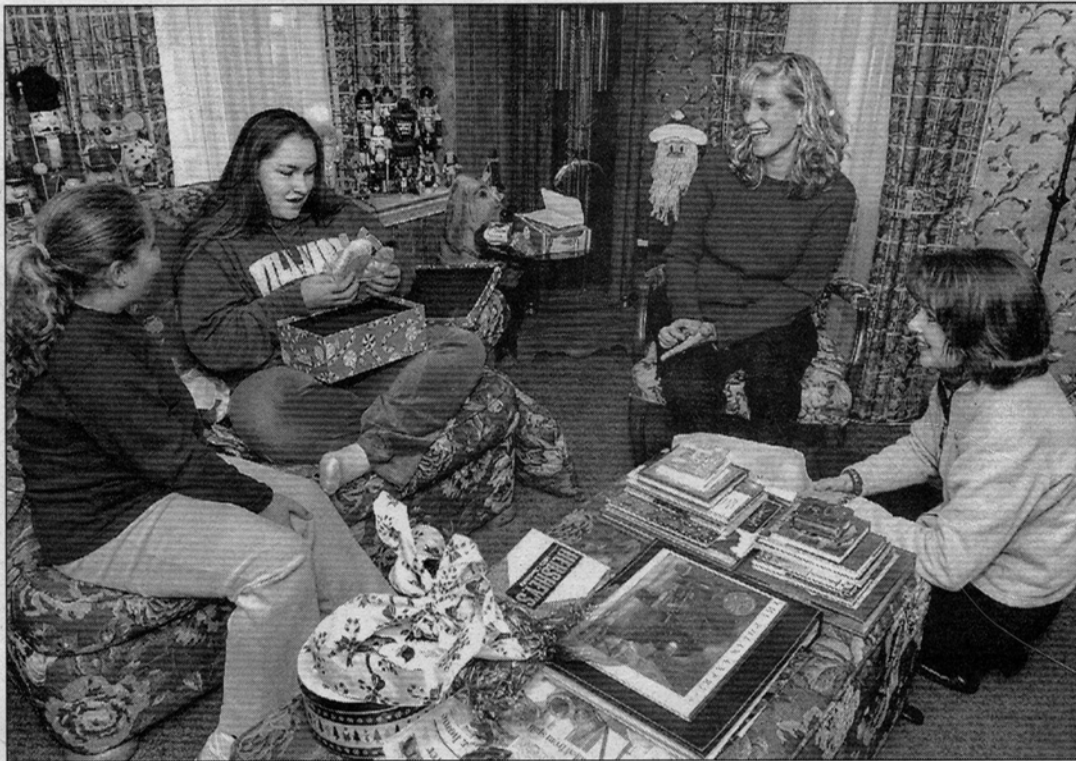


“Moms are keepers of traditions, rituals, daily routines so important to children. All children should have this.”

**Laura Munts**, Mommy's Light executive director



AKIRA SUWA / Inquirer Staff Photographer

In their Drexel Hill home, (from left) sisters Emily and Alexis DiClemente look at ballet shoes autographed by dancer Arantxa Ochoa after receiving them from Mommy's Light volunteers Julie Honish-Carman and Tracey Oberholtzer.

# Group keeps mothers' light alive for children

By Lini S. Kadaba  
INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

Around this time of the year, her favorite season, Sharon DiClemente would buy tickets for *The Nutcracker*. It was a treat, especially for older daughter, Alexis, who loves ballet, jazz and tap. Always, the Drexel Hill family would dress up and eat a nice dinner out before the show.

Even as DiClemente fought the spread of breast cancer for more than three years, she made sure the family tradition continued.

Last year, she died, at 42. But the family tradition she so loved will not, in part because of a Wayne-based nonprofit.

Mommy's Light Lives On Fund helps children 3 to 17 years old keep alive traditions shared with their deceased or terminally ill moms — some as simple as baking cookies. “Traditions honor their past, celebrate their present and build their futures,” executive director Laura Munts said. “These are



**The DiClemente family** in a photo taken last year before Sharon (left) died: Daughter Alexis, husband Bill and daughter Emily.

like golden threads. No reason to put those away.”

December, full of holiday traditions for many, is the group's busiest month, she said.

Mary Murphy, a single mother who at the time was dying of cervical cancer, got the idea for Mom-

my's Light in 1997, the year of Princess Diana's fatal automobile crash. As Murphy watched the funeral on television — and the close-ups of Princes William and Harry — she asked her own son, Bryan, then a fifth grader: *Who's going to keep their mommy's spirit alive?*

Munts, a close friend of Murphy's, pauses even all these years later, to collect herself as she recounts the story. “She knew she had to do that for Bryan. That's how Mommy's Light was born.”

Before Murphy died in 1998, she saw her idea take shape around a dining table. In 2000, Mommy's Light served its first family: On Mother's Day, Max and Madison Card planted blue flowers, bought by the group, in their Phoenixville garden. Their mother, Michele Card, 37, was in the last stages of breast cancer.

“It brings back memories,” said their father, Charlie Card, 43. “Kids, See **FUND** on B8

# Group helps keep traditions alive

**FUND** from B1

they forget real quick. Even adults, we forget. ... Mommy's Light makes it spectacular."

The group promises to help preserve a tradition — one for each child in the family — until he or she turns 18 years old.

Like the flowers in the Cards' garden, Mommy's Light has grown — to 75 children. With a nearly \$200,000 budget from grants and donations, it serves a population from Southeastern Pennsylvania, parts of South Jersey, and northern Delaware.

"We don't do the tradition with them," Munts said. "We just make all the arrangements." That demands getting details right, down to a child's favorite color or, in one case, a favorite turkey sandwich — with a specific type of mustard — that one mother always made her son for the family outing to the NASCAR races she loved.

While many of the families are financially needy, Munts said, the group's services are available without regard to income.

"Grief knows no economic bounds," she said. "Moms are keepers of traditions, rituals, daily routines so important to children. All children should have this."

On a recent Saturday, Bill DiClemente, 42, and his daughters — Alexis, 14, and Emily, 9 — sat in the cozy living room of their home. The window ledge was crowded with an extended family of Nutcrackers, "mommy's Nutcrackers," as Alexis calls them. A Nutcracker-shaped rug peeked out from under a coffee table.

*The Nutcracker* "was always something we looked forward to, even if it was the local high school production," said Bill DiClemente, out of work as a result of a disability. His wife was a research biologist at a pharmaceutical company.

Last Christmas, a few weeks after Sharon DiClemente's death, he took the children to *The Nutcracker* at the Metropolitan Opera House.

## More Information

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Soon after, he learned about Mommy's Light. Emily celebrated her tradition first. Mommy's Light arranged a trip to Hershey Park over the summer, and Emily went on rides she used to enjoy with her mother.

Then Tracey Oberholtzer, Mommy's Light volunteer director, and volunteer Julie Honish-Carman, both mothers themselves, turned their attention to the *Nutcracker* tradition.

They brought donated tickets for the Pennsylvania Ballet. A Hard Rock Cafe gift certificate. Nutcracker figures. And more.

DiClemente has watched the volunteers chat with his girls. "It's not mommy sitting there," he allowed. "It's another mommy figure — a mommy face."

The visitors also had a couple of surprises. The family went on a backstage tour the night of the performance. And earlier this month, Alexis had one last gift.

She pulled out a pair of autographed, pink pointe shoes that had been worn by principal ballerina Arantxa Ochoa. She dances the part of the Sugarplum Fairy in *The Nutcracker*.

"These are so cool," said Alexis, sitting cross-legged on a love seat and breaking into a smile. "This is awesome. Thank you so much."

"I think your mom would be pretty excited," Oberholtzer said, "and I think she'll be there with you the whole time."

Bill DiClemente agreed. "I haven't seen a smile that big in a long time. That was my gift."

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