

Memory of mom lives on

Group helps children in coping with loss

By AMY KUPERINSKY
Special to The Times

HAMILTON — Rebekah Renzi is only 3 years old, but yesterday she and her father, Mark, started a family tradition that will bond her to the memory of her mother for years to come.

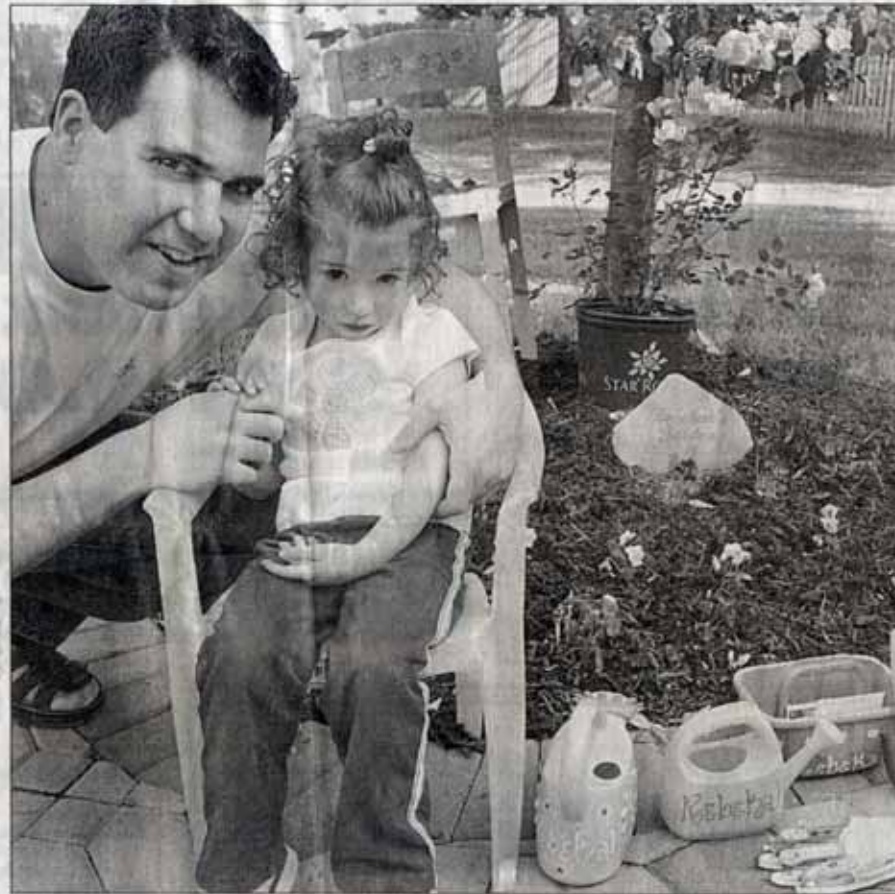
The two planted flowers in a garden at their home on Dorothy Lane, in recognition of a mother's love and their continuing love for her.

The Hamilton family, including mother Sharon who passed away last year from breast cancer, decided to create the annual ritual so that Rebekah could maintain a connection to and remember her mother. They were able to do so with assistance of Mommy's Light, a group that works to comfort children who have lost their mothers.

Single mom Mary Murphy founded the Mommy's Light Lives On Fund in 1997 when she was told she would die of cancer. She wanted her 10-year-old son Bryan to be comforted as he mourned her eventual death, and to somehow feel connected to her through a family tradition. So the two decided that Bryan would bake butter cookies at Christmas time just like they had done every year.

The volunteer-based organization serves families in the Delaware Valley area, president Laura Munts said. Each Mommy's Light volunteer is tasked with meeting the needs of a few families, interviewing children and fathers to determine what traditions they would like to carry on from year to year.

Volunteer Dale Bennet visited the Renzis at a hospice care facility the same day of Sharon's death. The family



Mark Renzi and his daughter Rebekah, 3, pose at the memorial garden they keep for wife and mother Sharon, who died last year. The remembrance was inspired with help from Mommy's Light, which helps children who have lost their mothers.

Staff photo by Stanley Brick

heard about Mommy's Light through a social worker at the hospice. They planted a pear tree and started a garden, calling it "Rebekah's Garden."

"They never did get around to planting the flowers," Bennet said. Now, every year on the day before Mother's Day, Rebekah and her father will choose flowers to plant in the garden in memory of her mother.

Such a yearly activity offers stability and routine to children who feel the abrupt loss of a parent or have to grow up without their mothers, Bennet said. "They look forward to that consistency, they know this thing is going to happen."

Though Rebekah is young and cannot fully understand the significance of the flowers, her father knows the tradition will blossom with meaning as she grows older.

"The hardest part of her mother leaving this world was leaving Rebekah behind, and I want to make sure that she understands that," Renzi said.

Rebekah joined her father and a friend, Colleen Lacey, to pick out the flowers at D.J.'s Country Gardens in Robbinsville yesterday. She cooed over a flat of purple and yellow pansies and blue impatiens and frolicked with a plastic watering can from a mini wheelbarrow filled with gardening toys donated by Mommy's Light. Her father and Lacey took pictures and videotaped her to preserve the memory. The garden center donated an additional bush of roses to help the garden grow.

Such simple pleasures are the cornerstone of Mommy's Light efforts. "They're the routine that's sort of the punctuation in our life," Munts said.

Children benefited by Mommy's

Light, ranging from ages 3 to 16, often choose their own way of remembering their mothers, whether it be a favorite cookie, cake, or place to go.

"We'll find out some specific information from the father and then we turn to the child, because it is important for children to have some measure of control over what is going on," Munts said. Children are asked, "What did you do with mommy that you want to keep doing?" and they tell us," she said.

"I commend and applaud their effort," Renzi said. "They reached out to me in my time of need and my time of crisis. I don't think about planting flowers and doing that kind of thing."

The nonprofit group is supported by individual donations and corporate sponsors like Comcast and Whole Foods Market as well as the Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation, Munts said.