

Everyday Hero: Ellen Jackson

Crystal Lake woman starts girls' camp in memory of daughter

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Every month, a bank statement would arrive, a physical reminder that Ellen Jackson's daughter was gone.

Nicole Jackson, 21, of Crystal Lake committed suicide Oct. 9, 2010, three weeks after she served as the maid of honor in her brother's wedding.

Jackson, a Prairie Ridge High School graduate, was taking courses through the Crystal Lake campus of Columbia College to go into banking, something she knew she wanted to do from her full-time job as a teller at Home State Bank, where she'd bring in cookies for her coworkers and an elderly regular customer.

"We were so blindsided," her mother said. "We had no clue whatsoever."

Through the wake and the funeral, friends and family began setting aside money for her parents, Cliff and Ellen Jackson, in a savings account.

The monthly statements for the account were an unhappy reminder, and, one day, Ellen Jackson told her husband she just wanted it gone. She suggested donating the money to a suicide prevention group of the Gift of Hope, the organization through which Nicole's organs were donated.

Portions of donations made to organizations such as that would end up going to administrative overhead, he reminded her, before suggesting that she do something.

Jackson thought about it. She talked to people. And then she decided to start a free two-day camp for girls, ranging in age from 11 to 15, named Camp Coley after Nicole's nickname.

The Jacksons were "on a mission to help others," said Mary Miller-Verchota, the treasurer of camp's board of directors and a friend of Ellen and Cliff for 15 years.

After helping the Jacksons gain tax-exempt status, Miller-Verchota volunteered the first summer the camp was held. She said the "whole camp is just a feeling of warmth and happiness."

"It's a great atmosphere," she said. "It's very loving and healthy. She comes up with great ideas. They've done crafts, and they've had different speakers come in. ... You see the girls come in and they're kind of shy, and by the second day, they're all great friends. There are a lot of smiles."

The first day of the camp is all about the girls, in which they make posters about themselves and

learn life skills. The second day is all about others, focusing on a service project.

Another event in January – a pizza party combined with making crafts that will be sold as a fundraiser – gives the girls a chance to get back together and bring friends.

“In a lot of ways, it’s therapy,” Jackson said. “There’s times where it’s really hard. But it’s going to be hard whether I’m doing something or not. I just feel like so many times you see an interview, and somebody says, ‘I just don’t want this to happen to somebody else.’ I’ll never know if what I’m trying to do truly makes a difference in somebody’s life.”

There are moments – when she comes up with a new idea or while trudging up the old sledding hill at Veterans Acres Park to Crystal Pines Rehabilitation and Health Care Center to donate flower arrangements made by the girls – that she suddenly hears Nicole’s laugh or what she would have said.

The camp draws its girls mainly by word of mouth, advertising for the first time last year, and doesn’t seek to only serve girls with depression or other issues.

“In today’s world, with the girls and the bullying and all the social media problems and everything else, every single girl needs what we do,” she said. “I think every girl at some point in her life has an issue of some sort that we try to address at camp.”

Next on the to-do list is a scholarship for girls who have attended the camp, something Jackson has held off on until she was sure the camp could support itself.