Gift to Holy Child Academy keeps memory of family alive

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All three of Carole and Kevin O’Sullivan's children died in their youth -- two at the ages of 6 and 11 of cystic fibrosis, and another in a car crash at 17. The infant girl they adopted in the aftermath of tragedy had severe health struggles, too, and nearly perished.

Over the years, in part to ease the pain of their children's deaths, the couple dedicated to philanthropy much of the multimillion-dollar fortune Kevin built as a television executive, distributing such series as "Dallas" and "Little House on the Prairie" in countries around the world.

Holy Child Academy, an elite grammar school in Old Westbury that is independent of the Diocese of Rockville Centre, is a long-standing recipient of the O’Sullivans' goodwill. Now, a $1-million-plus donation from the widowed Carole O'Sullivan will be used to help transform Holy Child, allowing the school to slash tuition by 40 percent and permit more families of modest means to enroll their children.

"It's just something I know Kevin would have wanted," Carole O’Sullivan said. "I love the school because it is nurturing, it is caring. It's got the values that I want for children."

Because of the gift, tuition will drop from about $20,000 a year to less than $13,000, headmaster Michael O'Donoghue said. The full decrease will start in September in the middle school, which is named after Kevin O'Sullivan because of previous donations. In the grammar school, the decrease will be phased in over a three-year period.

Changing demographic

The latest gift comes as Holy Child is undergoing a fundamental, transformative shift.

Founded a half-century ago by the Society of the Holy Child Jesus, an international order of nuns, the school is being purchased by a board of lay people because there are no longer...
enough sisters to run it.

The situation reflects the struggle of Catholic grammar schools across Long Island and the nation, hit by declining enrollments and a sharp drop in the number of nuns and priests to staff the institutions. In 2012, the Diocese of Rockville Centre closed six grammar schools.

But Holy Child, as the only independent Catholic grammar school on Long Island, is in a class by itself, so to speak, with the challenge of charting its own destiny. The school has 225 students in prekindergarten through eighth grade. About one-third get some financial aid.

For some, the school's transformation could represent a model for the future, as Catholic schools look increasingly to lay people to run and even own the institutions.

"Catholic schools on Long Island, to strengthen them, to make them exist in the future, are going to lie in the hands of lay men and women," O'Donoghue said. Other schools, he said, "need these kind of guardian angels" like the O'Sullivans to stay in business.

The O'Sullivans' earlier donations, which ran into the millions, have left a firm imprint on the school. The gym is called Kevin's Kingdom. A passageway linking two school buildings is Carole's Connection. There is O'Sullivan Hall, home to the middle school and administrative offices, the O'Sullivan Children's Playground for the youngest students, and the flowers bloom in Carole's Gardens each spring.

Elsewhere on the 14-acre campus, the Dolan Family Early Childhood Center was named to honor Charles Dolan and his wife, Helen. The Dolans, of Cove Neck, major philanthropists to Catholic causes, have contributed heavily to Holy Child, which two of their daughters attended. So have Peter Quick of Mill Neck, a former president of the American Stock Exchange and former president of the brokerage firm Quick & Reilly Inc., and his wife, Crisler.

The Dolan family has a controlling interest in Cablevision Systems Corp., Newsday's parent company.

O'Donoghue said the school could not survive without the support of these families. The O'Sullivans also provided primary funding for the O'Sullivan Pediatric Wing at St. Francis Hospital in Flower Hill, and have supported Telecare, the Catholic cable television network.

A cause close to the heart

Carole O'Sullivan said the school is a refuge, one that allows her to help children realize the dreams that her own did not have the chance to realize.

"This is my Harvard," she said. "You have to take your heart and put it into something. And this school has become what I want to devote my life and time to. I've been blessed with enough money to help them."

The ties that bind span decades.

The O'Sullivans' first child, Colleen, attended St. Brigid's grammar school in Westbury before she died of cystic fibrosis -- an inherited disorder that damages the lungs and digestive system -- at age 6 in 1968. Their son Kevin Jr., who also had cystic fibrosis, attended Westbury public schools, where he excelled, but he was killed in a 1977 car crash when he was a high school senior, around the corner from the family home.

Terence, 11, who was in fifth grade at Holy Child, died of cystic fibrosis six months later, in April 1978.
That December, the grief-stricken couple adopted a baby girl, Erin. She, too, became very sick and nearly died of pancreatic problems. But she recovered and later attended Holy Child from prekindergarten through its now-defunct high school.

Today, she works in the school's main office, and her two children are students. The O'Sullivans' beloved longtime housekeeper, Jenny Benitez, an immigrant from Panama, and her husband also have two children who attend.

In 1980, the couple created the O'Sullivan Children's Foundation to fund their causes. To honor Terence, the family provides $1,000 yearly scholarship awards for students at Holy Child. For 25 years, they also funded a $10,000 annual scholarship for a graduating senior at Westbury High School, in memory of Kevin Jr. The family has supported the national Cystic Fibrosis Foundation, too.

Carole O'Sullivan said she is not sure how she has survived the devastating losses of all of her biological children. She spoke of the love and support of her husband, who was 77 when he died in 2006 from a number of health problems, including strokes and Parkinson's disease.

A storied career

"He was the kindest, most caring, generous human being I have ever known," she said. She added: "I believe in heaven. I believe it's beautiful. I believe they're all together. I believe that Kevin went there to be with them."

His was a remarkable journey. The Manhattan native started his career as an actor, model and singer, appearing on programs including "Ted Mack's Amateur Hour." Moving into television's executive ranks, he joined the American Broadcasting Company and became president of ABC Films Inc. and ABC International Television Inc.

O'Sullivan eventually bought them out and formed his own company, Worldvision Enterprises Inc., one of the largest TV program distribution companies in the world. His work took him around the globe, from Venezuela to Japan to France to Australia, distributing shows including "The Love Boat," "The Jetsons," "The Jackson Five," "The Mod Squad" and "Let's Make a Deal."

He helped produce and distribute "Little House on the Prairie," whose star, Michael Landon, was a close friend. So were Doris Day, Bobby Vinton and Monty Hall of "Let's Make a Deal" fame. O'Sullivan was executive producer of Guy Lombardo's New Year's Eve television show from 1966 to 1978.

His career "gave him the money and the opportunity to get the best for his children," Carole O'Sullivan said. Before he died, he told her, "Just keep doing the good works, Carole."

"And I said, 'I will.' "

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