

# Dimensions of Living

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## At foundation of helping families

Local nonprofit's efforts continuing to make difference after nearly 7 years

By JENNIFER EYRING

**J**ust call them Christine, Kristy and Christina Kringle. Only these three Smithtown residents' spirit of giving doesn't only come during the holiday season.

When Smithtown residents Christine Fitzgerald, Kristy Middleton and Christina Carnemolla learned that 5-year-old Smithtown resident Kaylee Rivers was battling Stage 4 Neuroblastoma more than six years ago, they joined forces and helped bring the community together to fight with Kaylee, who died after fighting the disease for 13 months.

The three women, all mothers themselves, had pooled their resources and organized three different fundraising events for the Rivers family—Kaylee's parents Trish and Mike, her older sister Liana, 14, and her twin Emma, 12. The now annual events are a gold outing, a holiday breakfast prepared by Maureen's Kitchen—where Kaylee's grandfather frequently brought her when she was home sick from school—and a dinner dance at The Watermill on Route 347 in Smithtown.

Kaylee died in July 2009.

After working together for the Rivers family, the three women realized that if they continued holding the fundraisers every year, maybe adding a few more, they could help improve the lives of other families across Smithtown. That's when they decided to form the 501c3 not-for-profit organization Smithtown Children's Foundation.

Since it was established almost seven years ago, the foundation has helped a countless number of families overcome hardships.

"People don't expect there to be people like this in Smithtown," Ms. Fitzgerald said. "Every town has people in need, no matter how affluent."

The Children's Foundation works with local families to help during times of crisis. The nonprofit will pay bills, help organize fundraisers and much more.

"We've done so many varying things," Ms. Fitzgerald said. "It's hard to quantify it."

Ms. Middleton and Ms. Carnemolla both graduated from the Smithtown



**HOLIDAY HELPERS:** Smithtown Children's Foundation founders Christina Carnemolla (bottom left), Christine Fitzgerald (top left) and Kristy Middleton (right) with Santa, Mrs. Clause, Olaf and Elsa at this year's Holiday Breakfast fundraiser which was held at Great Hollow Middle School in Nesconset on December 6.

School District, and now their organization works very closely with the schools to give back to families in need. Every year, the foundation donates backpacks filled with school supplies and gift cards to various food stores, Target and Walmart. Ms. Fitzgerald said the foundation entrusts the schools' social workers to decide which families to give the donation to because they know them best.

Over the years, the foundation also created seven different scholarships that they give out every year with each one going to two students, one from Smithtown High School East and one from West.

The foundation helps many families keep the memory of their loved ones alive through these scholarships. Ms. Fitzgerald said it can be very cathartic for the families to read over the essays

applicants send in and to remember their lost loved ones every year when the scholarships are awarded.

One such scholarship is given in memory of Tristin Hart. Tristin was only 3 years old when his life was abruptly taken by a bacterial infection. He had been taking lessons at the local Saf-T-Swim and apparently bragged to everyone he knew that he was a "manatee," meaning he had reached that stage of progression at Saf-T-Swim.

To honor his love of swimming, Tristin's aunt, Susan Hart, teamed up with the Smithtown Children's Foundation to create a scholarship to help local families pay for swimming lessons.

Like in Kaylee's case, many positives can come from tragedy. While Richard and Samantha Specht, teachers

at Great Hollow Middle School and Smithtown High School East, respectively, were preparing their home for the onslaught of Hurricane Sandy, their 22-month-old son, Richard (Rees), drowned in their backyard pond.

In light of the tragedy, Kelly Brothers Landscaping of Coram went to their home and filled in their pond and re-landscaped their property. When the company refused to take any money, the Spechts decided that they would pay it forward, starting a movement of random acts of kindness in their son's honor.

In 2013, the Spechts were the recipients of the foundation's Kaylee Rivers Courage Award. The award, presented by Kaylee's mother, Trish, is given out every year at the dinner dance to individuals who have faced struggle and heartbreak with strength and bravery.

Ms. Fitzgerald said most of the families helped by the foundation in times of need or tragedy now want to give back to the foundation. Ms. Fitzgerald said the founders would like to extend the reach of the organization, but they still want to keep it relatively small. "The bigger organizations are, the move overhead there is," she said, "so we want to keep that small feel so the overhead is minimum."

The three founders all feel the foundation helps to teach their children important morals. "I feel like I'm teaching my kids a great lesson in humanity," said Ms. Fitzgerald, who has two kids, Alana, 18, and Colin, 14.

"We're teaching our kids that this is important and that it's important to be a part of something bigger than your own gratification," she said.

The foundation's next fundraiser is the dinner dance "Kisses for Kaylee & Friends" at The Watermill, which will be held Wednesday, February 4 from 6:30 to 10:30 p.m. To reserve tickets for the event (which cost \$125 per person or \$1,400 for a table of 12), make a donation or learn more about the Smithtown Children's Foundation visit, call Ms. Fitzgerald at (516) 835-1219 or visit [smithtownchildrensfoundation.com](http://smithtownchildrensfoundation.com).

"Seven years later, I feel like this is a community effort," Ms. Fitzgerald said. "People get what we do, they get that we want to make a difference, and they want to be a part of it."