



Fund for brain-tumor research

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The fund, which kicks off today, will support research at Cleveland Clinic for people 15 to 35 years old.

By WILLIAM K. ALCORN

VINDICATOR STAFF WRITER

POLAND — Thomas Andrew Detesco — “Tommy” — loved life.

Tommy verbalized that every day, said his mother, Lucille Detesco of Canfield, despite a cancerous brain tumor that affected him from age 3, when he began having seizures.

Tommy died Aug. 31, 2007, at 32, after dozens of trips to hospitals all over the country for examinations, surgeries, radiation treatments and chemotherapies.

In the late stages of his disease, he lost vision in one eye, his mother said.

“It’s OK, mom, I still have one eye,” was his response.

When he lost vision in his other eye, he said: “It’s OK mom, I can still hear. I love my life.”

Tommy treated his brain tumor with respect and was aware of what was happening to him, but it did not define his life, said his father, Dr. Thomas N. Detesco of Poland.

Tommy was born Oct. 21, 1974. His parents are divorced, and there are three siblings: Jennifer Innocenzi, Maria Moderalli and John, all of Canfield.

Tommy, who required learning disability classes all through school as a result of brain surgery and radiation treatments at the age of 6, graduated from Chaney High School. After high school, he worked in food service at Meshel sheltered workshop, a program of the Mahoning County Board of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities.

He collected baseball and “Star Trek” memorabilia and comic books and had an incredible memory, his father said.

He recalled World Series matchups and winners, and game statistics. He reminisced in amazing detail about family trips, and encounters with siblings and various shows and events he had attended, Dr. Detesco said.

“Until Tommy became ill in 1998, I was pretty much unaffected by his disease. But, then he became my

No. 1 priority,” said his brother John, 26, who was born two months after Tommy’s first operation.

The 1998 event was a recurrence of the cancer, after 17 years of remission, that required another brain surgery to remove the tumor, Dr. Detesco said.

John really put his personal life on hold the last three years of Tommy’s life. He was in college and decided to temporarily forgo his education to help take care of his brother, his father said.

“My brother was my best friend. Nothing I ever did was a chore,” John said.

Tommy seemed to affect everybody that way. He inspired a lot of people, his mother said.

He had siblings that had to take a back seat because of his illness but never complained.

He had a father who was relentless in finding new treatments and accompanied him all over the country for treatments, including into operating rooms to be his spokesman, she said.

He had Robert Rego, Lucille’s partner, who treated him like his own son; and a friend, Katie Conricote, who took a special interest in Tommy; along with many other friends at St. Joseph Church in Austintown, where he was a member; and at the Meshel workshop.

While being interviewed, Mrs. Detesco, a teacher at St. Joseph School in Austintown, did not speak about her role in caring for Tommy and the rest of the family. Dr. Detesco, however, said: “Lucille cared for Tommy and his siblings in a loving and supportive way that few could have done. Tommy was a 24-hour, seven-day-a-week responsibility that she accepted willingly and with unfailing commitment, patience and gentleness. She was the example and model for all of our children,” he said.

“I would have done anything. It wasn’t a chore. It was a privilege,” she said.

Dr. Detesco said the bond between he and Tommy grew stronger in recent years, particularly during many drives together to the Cleveland Clinic for treatments.

“I was increasingly drawn to his quiet confidence and love. His humility, trust and gentleness gave him a freedom to consent immediately to all that God had designed for him. Tommy was thought to be a person with special needs. I would rather think he was a special person serving our needs. Tommy truly became my hero,” Dr. Detesco said.

Out of his relationship with Tommy grew Dr. Detesco’s determination to not just contribute money to brain cancer research in his son’s honor, but to create a lasting memorial in the form of the Tommy Detesco Fund for Adolescents and Young Adults to support the Cleveland Clinic’s Brain Tumor and Neuro-Oncology Center.

“My goal is to get to the point where Tommy’s Fund will support an endowed chair at the Cleveland Clinic for exclusive brain tumor research for adolescents and young adults,” he said.

The fund was to be officially kicked off at 7 p.m. today during National Brain Tumor Action Week May 4-10 at the Holiday Inn on South Avenue in Boardman.

Dr. Detesco, whose practice, First Medical Associates in Boardman, is in internal and primary care medicine, said his son’s life was extended because of the technology being researched and perfected

during his remissions. Brain tumor research seemed to produce new treatments and techniques, such as gamma knife therapy, in which gamma rays are delivered directly to the tumor with less damage to the rest of the brain, just when Tommy needed them, he said.

Research produced innovations that prolonged Tommy's life, enabling him to make a positive difference in many lives, and his father wants the Tommy Detesco Fund to help fund research to do the same for other adolescents and young adults.

Dr. Detesco said targeting brain tumor research specifically for people ages 15-35 is necessary because a lot of energy already is placed on pediatric cancer and illness and tumors affecting older adults. "We want to put energy toward research that specifically affects adolescents and young adults," he said.

Dr. Detesco also believes cancer in general and brain cancer in particular are at an important treatment crossroad. He said he hopes that with research, cancer can be converted to a chronic controllable disease, which he sees as an important step on the path to a cure.

For information on how to contribute to the Tommy Detesco Fund, which Dr. Detesco plans to eventually make a national effort, call (330) 729-9228 or send a donation with check payable to the Cleveland Clinic Foundation, noting the Tommy Detesco Fund on the memo line, to 7341 Eisenhower Drive, Boardman, Ohio 44512.

"Tommy would think it is perfectly logical that we would be doing something to help other people," Dr. Detesco said.

alcorn@vindy.com