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FAYETTE COUNTY GIRL RAISES ADDICTION AWARENESS

Uniontown, PA – The late Angela Marie Phillips was just 34 years old when she lost her lengthy battle with addiction on Dec. 7, 2016.

Since her passing, Phillips' family has made it their mission to educate others about the disease and keep her memory alive in the process. Her sister, Mary Sampey, regularly speaks about addiction; has participated in multiple media programs; created several local addiction support groups; and founded a charitable fund in Angela's memory.

"Angela began taking prescription pain medication as a result of autoimmune issues and became addicted to them after the birth of her second child," Sampey said. "She had never been addicted to anything prior to this."

Unfortunately, Phillips' story is one of many that have affected families across Fayette County.

Fayette County Drug and Alcohol Commission Executive Director Jana Kyle said addiction often has a "complicated relationship with some of the most pressing issues facing our communities."

"Addiction does not solely affect the person with the substance use disorder; it affects their family, friends, loved ones, coworkers and anyone they associate with," Kyle said. "Substance abuse affects and costs the individual, family, and community in significant ways."

Some of those effects include loss of productivity, unemployability, impairment of physical and mental health, reduced quality of life, increased crime and violence, abuse or neglect of children, domestic violence, impaired driving, housing problems or homelessness, and dependence on non-familial support systems for survival.

Sampey said Phillips sought treatment for her addiction but ultimately died of an accidental heroin overdose, leaving behind two young daughters, Mia and Anna.

"We have rallied around them as a family, bound and determined to salvage their childhood and give them stability and love," Sampey said.

Kyle said, while addiction is a treatable disease, it's often incurable.

"Research in the science of addiction and the treatment of substance use disorders has led to the development of evidence-based interventions that help people stop abusing drugs and resume productive lives," Kyle said. "Treatment enables people to counteract addiction's powerful disruptive effects on their brain and behavior, and regain control of their lives."

Phillips' daughters now live in Dunbar with their maternal grandmother, Cindy Welling, and her husband, Chuck. Mia and Anna are in fourth and second grade, respectively, at Connellsville Area Catholic School.

Mia is a member of C-Glee, a Connellsville-based theatre group; just joined her school district's drama club; plays piano; and is an altar server for two parishes. She is also passionate about others and asked for a unique gift when she recently celebrated her 10th birthday.

"Imagine my astonishment when I asked Mia what she wanted for her birthday and she replied, 'food for those who need it,'" Sampey said, adding Mia was inspired by a story taught in school about Mother Teresa of Calcutta.

According to the tale, Teresa's mother instructed her to "never eat a single mouthful unless you are sharing it with others." Mia's birthday food drive sought to fulfill that message and honor her mother's memory by raising awareness about the dangers of addiction.

Connellsville Mayor Greg Lincoln helped promote Mia's initiative, which quickly turned into a widespread success. Sampey said Mia's school district, church community, friends, neighbors, nonprofit organizations and local businesses supported the birthday food drive "in a huge way," donating hundreds of pounds of food to the cause.

Among her supporters were Ford Business Machines, John Fiesta Agency of Connellsville and Fayette County Children and Youth Services, who held their own food drives to help Mia.

"Mia's mother, Angela, was a wonderful person who struggled," FCCYS Administrator Gina D'Auria said. "Our agency chose to do a food drive for Mia to support this amazing young child giving back to her community."

Mia donated the food to Connellsville Area Community Ministries, where Sampey works as development coordinator, just in time to help families in need for the holiday season.

Mia and Anna are also heavily involved with the Angela Phillips Memorial fund, which won the Community Foundation of Fayette County's Philanthropy Project competition by raising the most money for their cause.

The \$19,000 raised was donated to Connellsville Community Ministries' Porter Theater, where Mia recently performed in a production of Frozen Jr. Sampey said Angela's passion for the performing arts - and others - now lives on through her daughters.

"Mia's acts of service amaze me because when she first came to us, she had lost the only home she'd ever known; lost most of her possessions; had to change schools; and her grandparents became her parents," Sampey said. "She should be selfish and hard because of what has happened to her, but because of her loss, she sees how much she has now and that there are many people who go without."

Kyle said Mia is a courageous young woman for helping to raise addiction awareness through her mother's story, and her philanthropic efforts are helping to reduce the stigma often associated with the disease.

"No one is immune from addiction; regardless of a person's age, financial standing or education, anyone can be prone to addictive behaviors," Kyle said. "Substance use disorder is a far-reaching epidemic that

can affect anyone. Many of us know at least one person who is currently battling a substance use disorder. Sadly, many others know someone who lost their fight.”

Treating substance abuse disorder in our area cannot be accomplished with a one-size-fits-all approach, Kyle added. The Fayette County Drug and Alcohol Commission tailors treatment to fit patients’ individual needs, ultimately increasing the chances of long-term recovery.

Fayette County residents can also help address growing addiction problems in their communities, simply through education.

“Drug and alcohol addiction is often seen as a moral issue or a criminal matter, rather than a health problem. By becoming educated and understanding there are evidence-based methods of prevention, we can help reduce the stigma associated with this disease,” Kyle said. “When the stigma is reduced, it will allow for more open communication and learning.”

If you or someone you know is battling addiction, contact the Fayette County Drug and Alcohol Commission at 724-438-3576.

“Prevention efforts to all ages increasing education and awareness will only positively impact our schools, communities, political leaders, religious communities and families,” Kyle said. “If we understand that addiction is a disease and that people with substance use disorders can get better, we can help keep the hope of recovery alive.”

To learn more about the Angela Phillips Memorial Fund, visit www.cffayettepa.org/mary-sampey/.

To learn more about Fayette County, visit www.FayetteCountyPA.org.

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