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Fun-run honors Hannah Wertens, raises more than \$18,000 for Big Brothers Big Sisters of R.I.

By Common Ground staff

PROVIDENCE – The spirit of Hannah Wertens permeated the area around the Roger Williams Park Carousel on Oct. 28 as participants kicked off the annual Halloween hike to benefit Big Brothers Big Sisters of Rhode Island (BBBSRI).

Presented by the Rhode Island Building & Construction Trades Council (RIBCTC) in partnership with the Rhode Island AFL-CIO and Rhode Island Chapter of Associated General Contractors, the 11th annual 5K fun run honored women in the building trades and the Labor Movement in memory of Hannah, a little sister who passed away in 2018.

Heather was diagnosed with acute lymphocytic leukemia (ALL) at age 2, according to her mother, Debbie Kirchner. The cancer went into remission but returned when Heather was 5, and she beat it again. However, it returned when she was 13, and the chemotherapy and radiation treatments “wreaked havoc on her organs,” which led to her passing at the age of 15.

In addition to those treatments, she endured two bone marrow transplants, Kirchner said, and Heather contracted acute myeloid leukemia from a donor. However, the medical regimens and setbacks never changed Heather’s upbeat personality and spirit.

“She sparkled. She was always positive and had a great love of Jesus and God,” Kirchner said of her daughter. “She would do things even when she was not feeling good....And she always wanted to help people.”

An actress, dancer and singer, Hannah aspired to be a professional entertainer with an altruistic bent. Kirchner said her daughter talked of donating half the money she would earn to charity; establishing Hannah’s Haven – a house with pop star themed rooms; and giving hospitals miniature cars to transport young patients to tests and procedures.

Besides appearing in a number of plays, Hannah sang “God Bless America” to more than 36,000 Red Sox fans at Fenway Park in Boston in 2017, and she appeared in an Alex and Ani commercial, Kirchner said. “She exuded love. She loved everybody...and she forgave everybody...If you met her, you would automatically love her,” Kirchner said.

Taylor Millsbaugh, business development specialist for BBBSRI, characterized Hannah as an “amazing kid, who was funny, sassy and could hold down an adult conversation.” Millsbaugh said Hannah made her a better person by being grateful despite her challenges and looking on the positive side of life despite its challenges. “She was one in a million,” Millsbaugh said.

Mike Montecalvo, a news anchor on WPRI Channel 12, praised Hannah when talking to her mother at the fun-run, and said that he has a photo of the teen on his desk. Montecalvo was one of several people that spoke before the race, encouraging attendees to be a Big Brother or Big Sister.

According to BBBSRI, the Halloween hikes have raised about \$100,000, and the most recent event netted more than \$18,000.

During the opening ceremony, Vicki Virgule, president of Laborers’ Local 1033 was honored as Woman of the Year. A Big Sister for five years, she called that experience wonderful and asked when are people going to volunteer to be BBBSRI mentors if not now.

Signatory contractor Joe Brooks of Excell Construction Corporation, who has participated as a Big Brother for many years, was honored as Man of the Year. Excell has been a platinum sponsor of the hike for the past two years, and Brooks said he has encouraged many colleagues to become Big Brothers or Big Sisters. Vennicia Kingston of Laborers’ Local 271 received the Defender of Potential Award for her continued support of BBBSRI and her work as a construction craft laborer for nearly 10 years while also becoming a minority construction business owner in the process. She told Common Ground that she plans on becoming a Big Sister.