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Community to remember Vayas in walk to raise funds for cancer research

By: Sean Quinn - Staff Writer

MAPLEWOOD/SOUTH ORANGE, NJ — To say that Angelo Vayas was devoted to the Maplewood and South Orange community would be an understatement. In fact, those who knew the Village Trattoria proprietor remember him as someone who would do virtually anything for the two towns in which he lived and did business for years.

Whether it was contributing to local charities, sponsoring sports teams or helping fellow business owners, Vayas would go out of his way for his community, always with his signature smile on his face.

His death from brain cancer at the age of 50 in May left a void in the community as large as his generosity, according to his friends, but his philanthropic legacy will not be forgotten. Indeed, after years of his giving to Maplewood and South Orange, residents will soon be returning the favor to a cause he held dear.

The GenWealth Group, a Maplewood-based investment adviser, has just opened registration for a memorial walk it is sponsoring in Vayas' honor Saturday, Sept. 12, as part of its **GenWealth Walks for Hope** program.



Residents who pay the required \$50 minimum donation will become eligible to participate in the 3-mile guided walk through Maplewood Village in addition to receiving a pre-walk breakfast and commemorative T-shirt. All money raised through the event will be donated to an organization particularly meaningful to the Vayas family — the Caroline Fund, a nonprofit dedicated to raising funds and awareness for the cutting-edge brain and spinal cancer research being completed by the John Theurer Cancer Center at Hackensack University Medical Center, where Vayas was treated.

Due to the large number of people expected to take part, registration is limited.

The fact that so many residents are expected to join the walk shows just how esteemed Vayas truly was, according to **GenWealth Vice President of Marketing Cherie Lanza**. More than two months after his

death, residents continue to grieve Vayas, a reason Leanza said she wanted to hold the next GenWealth walk in his name. In holding an event to honor him, she explained the community can come together to pay their respects to a man who touched just about everyone he met.

“I think it’s going to be a wonderful tribute to him,” Leanza told the News-Record in an Aug. 3 phone interview. “It gives people a way to be emotionally connected to Angelo and show their support for the family. If they weren’t able to honor him in any other way, they can come on out and show their support for this great man who was so beloved in this village.”

Vayas was certainly well-loved by Leanza and her husband, Michael, who grew close to Vayas through the years as their business was located next to the Village Trattoria in Maplewood. In fact, she said that Vayas served as an integral source of guidance when they were establishing GenWealth, showing them the ropes in terms of how to operate a successful business in the township. For that she is forever grateful, Leanza said.

But they were far from the only ones to experience Vayas’ kindness. Leanza recalled that he was always there for anyone in need, which she said is how he will always be remembered.

“He always had a smile on his face, he always had a happy word for you, he was always giving back to people,” Leanza said. “He realized that he had a lot of success in his life and he had a lot of blessings, so he wanted to give back to the people around him. That’s really what he was all about.”

Mary Vayas agreed that her husband’s generosity was unparalleled, telling the News-Record that he always insisted on putting others before himself. Just as remarkable was his loving nature, she said, recalling that he was always ready with one of his infectious grins to cheer up anyone having a bad day.

Losing Vayas has been really hard for her three boys and herself, according to Mary Vayas, and his death has left a “big void” in their lives. But she also said they are doing OK — they have their memories, they have on another and they have Angelo Vayas’ positive attitude that never wavered even in the face of cancer.

“Angelo was the type of person who, in every aspect of his life, didn’t let anything defeat him,” Mary Vayas said in an Aug. 15 phone interview. “He truly looked at it head-on and dealt with it day-to-day. You never would have known he had cancer.

“He didn’t let it define him,” she said.

Even with Vayas’ can-do spirit, his disease did take its toll, Mary Vayas said. Near the end of his life, she said some personality changes and physical effects were brought on by the glioblastoma, a relatively rare form of brain cancer primarily affecting those aged 45 to 70 and which accounts for 15 percent of all brain tumors, according to the National Institutes of Health. Worst of all, very little could be done to help him; glioblastomas are highly malignant tumors that reproduce frequently and are very difficult to remove, owing to their finger-like tentacles. Patients diagnosed with glioblastoma typically survive less than 15 months.

Angelo Vayas lived for two years after his diagnosis, time for which Mary Vayas said she is grateful. Still, she said she wishes that she could have had more time with her husband, but the lack of funding to find better treatments for brain cancer made that impossible. For instance, the American Cancer Society awarded just \$12.9 million in funding to brain cancer research compared to the \$35.5 million it gave for breast cancer in fiscal year 2007-2008. Benefiting an organization such as the Caroline Fund, which seeks to remedy that difference, is a perfect way to honor Vayas' legacy, she said.

"Obviously he would still want to be here," Mary Vayas said. "But if anything good could come from his death, it would be to help other people so they wouldn't have to go through what he did."

The Caroline Fund is named for Caldwell resident Caroline Vandemark, who, at age 22, died from glioblastoma.

Longtime Maplewood resident Risa Olinsky hopes to raise as much money for the Caroline Fund as possible, especially having seen Vayas' own generosity firsthand. Olinsky, who knew Vayas from the time he was a teenager, said she cannot recall him saying "no" anytime she asked him for a donation for Columbia High School, even when his children did not attend the school.

Simply put, Olinsky said Vayas cared about others, which is why he is remembered so fondly and his restaurants are still successful today.

"He was just a very special person," Olinsky told the News-Record in an Aug. 13 phone interview. "There's a hole in the community."

Olinsky, a certified health and wellness coach, said it only took her about "two seconds" to agree to leading the walk, which she mapped out to include three loops that residents can choose from if they do not wish to walk the full 3 miles. As both a fitness professional and veteran planner of walking events, she encouraged residents to join the walk as a way to benefit their health. But most importantly in the aftermath of Vayas' death, she pointed out that walking is very therapeutic.

"When you walk in a group with a community, whether it's cheerleading for a special event or mourning the loss of someone who was a loved one, people open themselves up," Olinsky explained. "People are going to talk about Angelo. They're going to talk about their memories, they will talk about great meals they had at Village Trattoria, the parties. It's very uplifting, and walking is very healing. It brings the community together."

That sense of community togetherness is a major reason Maplewood Deputy Mayor Kathleen Leventhal is encouraging residents to participate. Leventhal, who will serve as a guest speaker prior to the walk, said the event is an opportunity for Maplewood and South Orange residents to grow even closer while paying tribute to a man who deserves to be honored. Like Leanza and Olinsky, the deputy mayor also witnessed Vayas' generosity, telling the News-Record about a time when the popular restaurateur donated meals to a family who was experiencing difficulties.

But Leventhal also pointed out that Leanza and her husband deserve recognition for their own generosity in hosting the event. Having helped them put on the first two GenWealth Walks for Hope, she lauded their philanthropy and its positive impact on the township.

“The fact that they do the cancer walks is phenomenal,” Leventhal said in an Aug. 13 phone interview. “They are giving back to Maplewood so much.”

Leanza said being able to help those in need means a lot to her. And GenWealth certainly has benefited many people through their cancer walks. According to Leanza, the first two walks raised a total of \$15,000 for the Breast Cancer Research Foundation, and she hopes to raise just as much for the Caroline Fund.

Beyond this year, she said she hopes to continue hosting walks both for new causes and those to which GenWealth has already contributed.

For now, however, Leanza said she is just focused on giving Angelo Vayas the tribute that he and his family deserve.

“He’ll always be a fixture here,” Leanza told the News-Record. “He’ll always be part of this community.”