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By:

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Natalie Hool and Jim Matthews were tired.

Tired of courting donors. Tired of haranguing local groups and businesses to help them put on an annual 5K race in honor of their late son, Maxwell C. Matthews. They were tired of feeling like people were forgetting Max, too.

They both remember going on a local radio show a few years after Max's death to publicize the race and the host telling him that their son's death was "not news." They each can tell you stories of donors or businesses saying, "Max who?" when asked to donate.

"I'd think, "Yeah, they're forgetting about him," Hool said.

At a certain point, it felt antiseptic. Like work.

That's why, after a fifteen-year run of putting on Max's Race every June, including last Saturday's 15th annual event (on 6/22/19), Hool and Matthews are handing over control to the Davies Project, a mid-Michigan non-profit.

Max's Race is what Hool and Matthews have used to center their efforts to remember Max, putting on the first race just months after his death. But now, albeit bittersweet, instead of maintaining their son's legacy, they'll finally get to live in it.

"It was something we could channel our grief into," Matthews said.

Max was born in May of 1998, but fell ill as an infant. He was sent home with a 14-day course of antibiotics for what doctors suspected to be an ear infection. He ended up taking them for 28 days.

Hool realized it was more than an ear infection when Max would only be comfortable being held a certain way. It turned out he had contracted meningitis, which causes swelling around the brain and spinal cord and can be fatal for infants.

Max survived, thanks to life-saving care at Sparrow Hospital, but was left developmentally delayed from his bout with meningitis. Days flowed into months, then years, and Max did better every day. For a period, Matthews and Hool thought they'd cleared the hurdle.

But damage from the meningitis persisted. Max began having seizures as he grew older, and in March of 2005, he asphyxiated in his sleep, due to a seizure.

Max had brushed with death as a weeks-old infant and pulled through. For a couple who thought they'd seen the worst and poured their lives into helping Max, this was devastating.

"You kind of let your guard down and, "Oh, now he's dead," Matthews said. "We belong to a club that I don't want to have any members."

In the immediate aftermath, the couple was rudderless, keen to stay home, even to stay in bed all day, to not face the world. Doing nothing forever wasn't an option, though. At the urging of a close friend, they decided to start Max's Race.

In mid-April of 2005, just about a month after Max's death, Matthews did what anyone in the Lansing area would do to start a race: He went to Playmakers. He said they wanted to run the inaugural race that July.

The initial race was so successful, Playmakers added it to their race series.

And, for the last fifteen years, Max's Race has been a mainstay event for Matthews and Hool. The mission [2] is to "raise money and awareness of local programs focused on helping kids and their families with medical services."

When the annual run started, charity races were just getting en vogue. Over the years, the event grew "including the addition of a kids' mile, bouncy houses, food, and more" to accommodate for competition and to keep Max's Race relevant.

"You have to be the Meijer of races," Hool explains.

As the calendar kept turning and the planning became more elaborate, it wore more on Matthews and Hool. Coordination with Michigan State University (where the race is held) to fundraising to partnering with local businesses and even marking out the course "it all fell to the two of them and their rag-tag committee of volunteers."

In 2018, Matthews biked the course to set it up and kept patrolling through the day on his bike. He rode 27 miles by day's end.

"We just don't have the resources" to keep doing this, Matthews said.

But the Davies Project for mid-Michigan children [3] does.

The Davies Project provides non-medical help to families with children who face long-term medical problems, pairing families with volunteer drivers to make sure children make all of their appointments. They've also been a recent partner with Max's Race, joining Sparrow Hospital.

When the Davies Project offered to take over the race, even potentially hiring a race director, Hool and Matthews leapt at the opportunity. The Davies Project, they say, will offer the resources, expertise and time they either didn't have or couldn't give.

With a proper team, Matthews and Hool expect the Davies Project to "breathe new life" into an event that's already raised more than \$200,000 for Sparrow.

And though they're finally stepping back, Matthews and Hool still plan to be involved.

"I just want to run it as it's going on," Hool said. "Max's Race."

Matthews isn't sure if he wants to run the race or, for once, just get to soak the day in, finally free of race-day stress.

But either way, after fifteen years of crafting a legacy for their late son, Matthews and Hool will at last get to live in it.

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