

Tragedy rallies Centennial community

By Gary Weckselblatt Staff Writer | Posted: Tuesday, April 1, 2014 12:00 am

When Jim Lithgow was growing up on Pine Road in Warminster, his good friend and next door neighbor, Jackie Lynch, died of cancer.

Lithgow was heartbroken and spent as much time as he could at his friend's home, consoling Lynch's parents. Lithgow cared so much for Jackie that he named his son after him.

Today, that young man, only 19, has been in and out of a coma with a fractured skull and bleeding in his brain following a brutal melee at a Bloomsburg University fraternity party in which he tried to play peacemaker.

And though Jim Lithgow, a 1979 graduate of William Tennent High School, has spent his adult life in Cumberland County, not far from Harrisburg, his boyhood buddies are reeling for their friend over the tragedy.

"I'm looking at pictures of us from 35 years ago and thinking 'Here's my buddy, and now he's going through this,' " Steven Adams said.

Adams, a member of the Centennial School Board, said the district will be holding a "dress down" fundraiser for the Lithgow family. All donations will go to Jackie Lithgow's medical expenses. Checks should be made payable to "Jim & Lisa Lithgow," and mailed to Jim & Lisa Lithgow, c/o Emert & Associates, CPAs, 131 E. Main St., Lock Haven, PA 17745.

"This really hits close to home," said Scott Kinkly, who grew up on Cypress Road, around the corner from Lithgow and attended the same schools. "He was one of the guys we always hung around with."

Garth Torok, who grew up in Southampton, played basketball with Lithgow at Tennent. "We had a blast together, some great times growing up," Torok said. "Your heart goes out to the family. It's kind of a wake-up call. These things do happen and do happen to people you know.

"It kind of leaves you kind of blind for a second. You take hold of your own situation and think my problems aren't as bad as they seem."

Adams, Kinkly, Lithgow and Torok were part of a tight group of several friends who ran together in the 1970s. Those relationships have changed by necessity over the years through relocation, jobs and families.

But even though he hasn't resided in Bucks County since marrying his Bloomsburg University sweetheart, Lithgow still returns to play golf with his buddies or take in a basketball game at the Palestra.

Local residents will remember his dad, Lenny, as the former basketball coach at Cheltenham High

School. His mom, Pat Large, still works as a nurse at Doylestown Hospital.

Kinkly visited with Lithgow at Geisinger Medical Center in Danville, where Jackie has been since the Feb. 23 attack. Kinkly said Jim hasn't been home since that night, sharing shifts with his wife, Lisa, to and from a hotel connected to the hospital.

"You don't really know what to say," Kinkly said. "You wish you could do more, say the right thing. I hope my being there meant something. He knows I'm praying for them."

Jackie Lithgow was at a Bloomsburg party crashed by four Kutztown football players who were asked to leave but refused, when fights broke out, according to The Morning Call, which cited police and court records.

Justin S. Wieder, a linebacker from Quakertown, knocked out a Bloomsburg student with a single punch, which ignited the fireworks that spilled onto the street, according to police.

Lithgow was trying to break things up, telling the football players to leave, police said, when he was punched in the head by Angel S. Cruz, a running back from Berks County. Lithgow fell, hitting his head on the pavement, according to court records.

Police filed aggravated assault and related charges against Cruz and Wieder in connection with the fight. Two other Kutztown football players — defensive linemen Jake B. Wygant and Eric T. Condron — are not being charged and have been reinstated by the team.

Three other Bloomsburg students were treated for concussions, one of them suffering a ruptured eardrum and a bone fracture behind his ear, according to The Morning Call.

In the meantime, Jackie Lithgow lies in a hospital bed, his life in jeopardy. In pain, unable to talk, losing weight, he looks nothing like the basketball player who played for his dad, the coach at Boiling Springs High School in the South Middleton School District.

Leo Quinn, a Warminster supervisor, can empathize with the family's horror. In 2007, as a student at Kutztown University, Quinn's son Kyle, also 19, was beaten to death while walking down a borough street.

"Your world is just turned upside down, and you're praying for a miracle," Quinn said. "The sadness and the sorrow is indescribable. It subsides a little bit but it never actually goes away. I'm glad to see the community is rallying around to help the family through this hard time."

He said the Warminster Republican Club has made a donation on behalf of the family.

"You ask why these random acts of violence have to happen," he said. "I wish we could figure out a way to make them stop, but they never do. Just turn on the TV. They happen every day."

The family has been writing a blog, PrayforJackie.com, which Kinkly said Lisa Lithgow started and includes posts by Lisa and Jackie's sister Lindsay. It describes, in heart-wrenching detail, Jackie's ups and downs, and the family's love for him.

“I cannot tell you how hard this is for a parent,” a recent post by his mom said. “My heart goes out to all of you who have children that have gone through major medical issues as I now can completely understand the helplessness that you have felt. I just want to make it all go away.”

On March 22, Lindsay wrote: “You’ve laughed today, smiled, said I love you in sign, kissed my hand which made my heart melt completely and tears well up in my eyes, found the laces on the foam football we brought for you and had fantastic form by the way.

“This is not the Jackie we saw in the first night. You are now much healthier, stronger and alert than anyone thought possible. ... Every day that goes by is a reminder of how remarkable of a person you are and I just want you to know that today you inspire more people than you will ever know!”