

Solace in the 'Christmas Box'

Mother seeking statue to help grieving parents

By Scott J. Croteau
TELEGRAM & GAZETTE STAFF

SHREWSBURY — Linda Bilodeau knows the grief and pain that follows when a parent loses a child. Her daughter, Jill, died September 2001 in a motorcycle accident on Route 9 in town.

Ms. Bilodeau is now working to bring a statue called the "Christmas Box Angel — Angel of Hope" to the area as a way of creating a place where parents who have lost a child can grieve and find some serenity.

The statue was part of the book "The Christmas Box," which was written by Richard Paul Evans and is about a woman who mourns the loss of her child at an angel monument. The story, published in 1993, is fiction, but there was once an angel statue in Salt Lake City, according to the Web site the-christmasboxhouse.org. A new statue was placed in the city in 1994 when grieving parents searched for the statue as a place to visit, the Web site said.

Now there are almost 60 statues scattered across the country including ones in Easthampton and Westerly, R.I.

"It is a tribute to all the kids who passed," said Ms. Bilodeau, 57, in her home at 80 Main Circle. "We want to keep their memories alive and the only way we can keep their memory alive is to reach out to other parents in the community who are suffering. I know what it is like to have your child ripped from your life."

An organization called The Christmas Box International arranges for local groups to buy the statue, which costs \$12,500, plus a few thousand dollars for a monument base. Ms. Bilodeau is seeking donations as well as a place to put the statue.

"It doesn't have to be in Shrewsbury," she said in a room full of family pictures. "I want it to be where it can reach as many grieving parents who are looking to have some place of comfort."

Ms. Bilodeau is part of the Children's Remembrance Group, which is a group of parents in the area who have all lost children, she said. The group consists of families from Shrewsbury, Auburn, Sutton, Worcester and Northboro to name a few. The group is having a vigil on Dec. 11 at the Hoagland-Pincus Conference Center in Shrewsbury.

Ms. Bilodeau set up a charity to



T&G Staff/PAUL KAPTEYN

Linda Bilodeau holds a small marble replica of the "Christmas Box Angel" in front of a collage of photographs of her daughter, Jill, who was killed in a motorcycle accident in 2001.

receive donations for the statue and has some fundraisers planned. She also reached out to state Rep. Karyn E. Polito, R-Shrewsbury, for help with the endeavor.

"I view this project as a very positive and uplifting opportunity to bring together a community locally to offer a place of peace and serenity for individuals to go to reflect upon their own circumstances," Ms. Polito said.

A few people in town have already come forward with offers to donate land, Ms. Polito said.

Ms. Bilodeau found out about the "Christmas Box" statue in October and that spawned her idea to bring one to this area.

"I just became my mission and my

passion," she said about bringing the statue to the area. "It helps me reach out to other people who have suffered some loss."

Cory Bilodeau, Jill's brother, plans on visiting the angel statue in Salt Lake City at the end of the year.

Jill Bilodeau attended the Worcester State College's nursing program and dreamed of working on Life Flight, the medical rescue helicopter. A free spirit, Jill enjoyed surfing in Rhode Island. After her death, the family spread her ashes off the coast of Rhode Island.

A memorial for Jill is on a privately owned piece of land in Point Judith, R.I.

Turn to **Statue/Next Page**

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Statue for grieving parents

Statue/From Previous Page

Clinton J. Allard, the driver of the motorcycle that Jill rode on the night of her death, was sentenced in January to 2½ years in jail with four months to serve for motor vehicle homicide by negligent driving.

"A piece of me got ripped away," Ms. Bilodeau said. "You're powerless and you are never going to change that. I can't get my daughter back."

That is why Ms. Bilodeau new

mission is so important, she said. It gives her and other families a place where they can reflect and possibly heal a little.

"I think it sends a powerful message to people who have insurmountable grief that you can survive," she said while she watched a candle's light dance on the table. "Is it easy, no; but it is possible if you reach out."

For more information, Linda Bilodeau may be reached at (508) 842-6001 or lbilodeau@me-gapathdsl.net.