

Benefit concert will raise money for

HOPE

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Allard, the man behind the wheel that killed Jill was sentenced just last week for 2 1/2 years with four months to serve in the Worcester County Jail and House of Correction in West Boylston.

Linda Bilodeau sympathizes with Sylvia Gaumond, a woman whom she has met just twice. Despite their limited meetings, the two women share a bond and friendship, especially as the anniversary of Jason's death arrives.

"It's very painful," Bilodeau said of the days and weeks leading up to the anniversary date. "You relive the times before (the death), you relive everything all over again."

In an effort to help provide some solace to other parents who have lost a child, Bilodeau and Gaumond are spearheading an effort to bring an "Angel of Hope" to Central Massachusetts.

There are 59 Angel of Hope statues across the United States, with the closest to this region being in Westerly, Rhode Island and Easthampton. The statues were inspired by "The Christmas Box," a story authored by Richard Paul Evans in which a grieving mother visits a monument in a cemetery, groveling at its feet in sorrow over the loss of her child. The story, written for

Evans' daughters to show his love for them, was given to a handful of family and friends as gifts. The book found its way into the hands of others and soon it caused a stir. Several years later, numerous Angel of Hope statues, similar to the one in the story, sprouted up across the country. The first official Angel of Hope statue was dedicated Dec. 6, 1994 in Salt Lake City, Utah.

Bilodeau learned of the Angel of Hope statues after she attended a book signing and placed her e-mail address on a list for a newsletter. Reading one of the subsequent newsletters, a mention of Angel of Hope caught her eye and she investigated it further and soon found herself working to bring one to the area.

"I just started to think about it and what better way to remember the children by," she said.

Soon after, Gaumond learned of Bilodeau's efforts and joined her in the crusade to bring a statue to Central Massachusetts for other grieving families to have a place to remember their loved ones and find strength together.

"It's like a memorial garden for people to go to," Gaumond said. "This is a place where whether your child is buried near there or not you have support. It's there for all of our children. Just because your child is gone they're still with you. They'll always be with you."

“Everybody's story is different, but in the end it's the same pain.”

— Linda Bilodeau,
Angel of Hope organizer

Bilodeau agreed.

"There's some kind of strength derived from it. It's a place to seek solace," she said. "I know Jill is always around."

Bilodeau added that their family tragedies affect more than just mom and dad, brother and sister. They can affect the community.

"It's amazing how many lives are touched by the death of a child," she said. "A lot of people don't want to talk about it. It's not an easy thing."

She said she has found "an inner healing" by pursuing a localized Angel of Hope statue.

"When you reach out to other people and take up a cause it's the only way to go on," Bilodeau said. "Everybody's story is different, but in the end it's the same pain. It's the parent-child connection and the pain you endure is a hole that's never filled. There's no way to fill, you just learn to cope and deal."

Gaumond said she too has found it therapeutic.

"I like to do what I can to help other parents," she said.

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