

Wine tasting fundraiser honors mother and son

By Jodi Rigotti

On a sunny autumn afternoon last month, friends and family gathered to sip wine, munch on snacks, and try their luck at a tricky tray raffle featuring gift cards, sports tickets, jewelry, and more. But above all, they gathered to remember a son and a mother lost too soon.

Chris Phillips, 27, passed away this summer, after undergoing surgery to relieve fluid buildup around his heart. Early that same morning, Susan Phillips, 64, had a massive heart attack at home and went into a coma. She passed away a few days later.

The family was left shocked, grief-stricken, and unsure of where to turn next.

Dr. Sharon Rose Phillips, the sister of Chris and daughter of Susan, knew she wanted their lives to continue on in some way. So with the help of family and friends, she started the Christopher and Susan Phillips Foundation, which among other philanthropic efforts, will help provide scholarships to high school students wishing to pursue a career in nursing. Sharon explains, "I need something positive to come from this loss...I want their optimistic natures and helping ways to live on." Chris was working toward obtaining a nursing degree, which is how he met his longtime girlfriend Michelle Kieffer. His mother was a Pharma-

cy Technician at Walgreens in Short Hills for more than two decades.

The wine-tasting event on Oct. 16 was the first of many Foundation fundraisers to come. Carmine Toto III of Villa Rose Wine School in Madison generously offered up his winery as the venue for the event and also provided all of the wine for tasting.

Carmine opened up the wine school in 2003 after studying the craft and making his own wine for years. It's a hobby that evolved into a passion, he said, and one that helps celebrate and preserve his Italian roots. The property boasts a bocce ball court and a workshop converted into a small meeting hall for the local Italian club. There's also a large swimming pool, a barbecue pit, and an arbor covered with 50-year-old Concord grape vines.

"There's never a dull moment at the Villa," says Carmine. And that certainly rang true at the Christopher and Susan Phillips Wine Tasting Fundraiser, as hundreds came and went throughout the afternoon. As they tasted wine, sampled food, and dropped tickets into tricky tray baskets, people also had the opportunity to view a running slideshow of Chris and Susan. The Giants vs. Buffalo Bills game played, too, on a big-screen TV mounted right above the barrels of grapes. "My brother, an avid Gi-

ants fan, wouldn't have had it any other way," says Sharon.

Frank Phillips, husband of Susan and father of Chris and Sharon, was so touched by the turnout. "I'm just incredibly grateful for all the people that came out to honor and remember my wife and son."

Sharon adds that the event could not have been a success without all of the generous volunteers and vendors. "There are so many people to thank. The Springfield and Summit First Aid Squads and Marty's Reliable Cycle in Morristown for lending us their tents. The Italian Village and Rocco's Italian Restaurant in Madison for donating the food. The dozens of business for donating items for the tricky tray raffle, all of which are noted on our website. Our friends and family for the preparation, the cleanup, and every detail in between. And of course, the Toto family for offering up their wine and their entire Villa for the afternoon."

Through events like this and through all the people whose lives will be bettered by the Christopher and Susan Phillips Foundation, Sharon and her father are finding some comfort in the fact that they're helping to keep the lifelines of Chris and Susan forever flowing.

Take a moment to visit the website at: christopherandsusan-phillipsfoundation.org.