

localhero

madison

A taste of the grape raises funds for scholarships

By Jodi Rigotti

Special to
MadisonChatham This Week

On a sunny autumn afternoon in October, 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, died 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 died 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 nurs-

ing.

"I need something positive to come from this loss. I want their optimistic natures and helping ways to live on," Sharon Phillips said.

Chris Phillips was working toward obtaining a nursing degree, which is how he met his longtime girlfriend, Michelle Kieffer. His mother was a pharmacy technician at Walgreens in Short Hills for more than two decades.

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

Toto opened 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.

Hundreds attended the Christopher and Susan Phillips Wine Tasting fundraiser. As they sipped wine, sampled food and dropped tickets into tricky tray baskets, guests viewed a slide show of photos of Chris and Susan. The Giants vs. Buffalo Bills game played, too, on



At the wine-tasting benefit, from left, Carmine Toto Jr., Kristina and Carmine Toto III with their two children. Carmine and Olivia, Frank Phillips, Sharon Phillips and Marie Toto. PHOTO COURTESY OF JODI RIGOTTI

a big-screen TV mounted right above the barrels of grapes.

"My brother, an avid Giants fan, wouldn't have had it any other way," Sharon Phillips said.

For more information, visit www.christopherand susanphillipsfoundation.org.

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