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■ COLBORNE

Family rises above second tragedy to help others

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COLBORNE — Supporting the Colborne Public School music program young Mitchell Ferguson loved was the original purpose of the annual Festival of Trees, organized in memory of the 14-year-old boy who was killed in a tobogganing accident.

Mitch's teacher Chad Morford was an inspiration, his mother Robin said in a recent interview. And she was moved by his vision of a music program that could encompass the whole school and allow them to participate in competitions coast to coast.

Originally, all the family wanted to do was find a way to give back for the outpouring of support the community offered in the wake of their tragedy.

They suggested in-memoriam donations in Mitch's name for the music program, because the drumline he was a member of was fundraising for a competition in Montreal at the time. They raised \$8,600 that way.

But Ferguson wanted to continue the family's support of the music program the following Christmas with the first Festival of Trees. They raised \$10,000 that year, and have managed to raise a little more every year since.

She estimates that the total benefit to the music program to date is more than \$50,000.

"That is very telling in a small community where, if you walk away with \$2,000, you're doing

good," Ferguson said.

By this year, the event had grown too big for the school and was moved to the Colborne Legion. Local merchants and supporters supplied 25 fully decorated Christmas trees for auctioning and raffling off, with tickets at \$10 each for a Nov. 23 draw.

The support grows each year, Ferguson said, and it has become an official community weekend event.

Not only has Morford been saved from six to eight fundraisers a year to pursue his vision, Ferguson said. He has seen his Oak Percussion group compete all over the country, and has also been instrumental in developing the Ontario Drumline Association.

But the festival is now about something more than continuing that support. It is also about a family who has lost a beloved child reaching out to others who have experienced the same loss.

Ferguson refers to this as the Remembering Our Babies component. This year, in addition to Mitch, they honoured the lives of five other children with a Memorial Tree. This tree is the grand prize, with the greatest gift packages that go along with it.

As well, there are vast numbers of prizes and packages for auctioning and raffling. And the families of 11-year-old Lizzy Corbeil, 20-year-old Robin Taylor, 21-year-old Kandas Derry,

seven-year-old Eric Taylor and seven-year-old Kaitlyn Bates were also invited to put together a prize packages in honour of that child.

For Mitch, it's always been a Toronto Maple Leafs package.

For one of the other families, it was a Christmas In Cobourg package, with \$850 worth of treasures and gift certificates.

For Mitch's big sister Andrea, it was a special package in memory of her unborn baby Jaylynn Neveah Forget. Jaylynn was lost when her mother was involved in a tragic car accident earlier this year. At the time Andrea Ferguson had been in her 24th week.

"It was very hard for me to be involved this year, and I've been part of it since it started for my brother," she recalled.

"I never thought my child would actually be remembered, and so soon."

For her parents Robin and Darryl Ferguson, the loss of their first grandchild was like revisiting 2009 and the loss of their son.

"It was to be our new beginning," Ferguson said of her granddaughter.

The family managed to make it through this second tragedy thanks to a number of things, including a belief in the power of compassion and their delight in their young foster son, who brings energy, joy and innocence to their home.

Andrea said she was inspired as well by her mother's example.

"I was blown away this year, even with our accident, by how much strength Mom had for the other Memorial Tree families this year. She was really like a rock," she said.

"One family joined this year who'd had a hard time. She would spend an hour on the phone at night with the mother.

"She is the one that really was strong, and connected with all the families. I thought that was incredible, after what we went through."

Somehow the family recovered in time to start work on the 2013 Festival of Trees in August, which reminds them of the big picture each holiday season: through their efforts, and those of other bereaved families and a handful of teachers from Colborne Public School (including Morford), the goodness and compassion of the community can be channeled in support of a program that enriches children's lives — and meant so much to Mitch.

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SUBMITTED PHOTO

The Memorial Tree - in honour of Mitchell Ferguson, Kandas Derry, Lizzy Corbeil, Katelynn Bates, Eric Taylor and Robyn Taylor - is always the grand prize at Colborne's Festival of Trees, and the one that has the greatest gift packages to go along with it.

