

Making something positive out of loss

By MADONNA KIMBALL

The holiday season, with all its festive activities, decorations, baking, shopping and gift-giving is a time most folks share with family and friends. But the season can also be a painful time for many. Missing loved ones and reliving memories of the good times they shared are a big part of their holiday season.

Ann Rolling and Dee Banks of Wimberley are two loving mothers who experienced the loss of beautiful daughters and understand the pain first-hand. Dee's daughter, Valerie Ann, 15, died in an auto accident in July 1996. Ann's daughter, 16-year-old Emily Ann, died days before Christmas in an auto accident the same year.

How do these women cope with the loss and memories? By channeling their energy into something positive and dedicating the fruits of their labor to their daughters.

"By making every day count and reinvesting in the dignity of the human spirit," Ann says.



Emily Ann Rolling

Dee and daughter Valerie had a special relationship, they were mother and daughter and they were best friends.

"When I lost Valerie, I felt that I couldn't live without her," Dee recalls. "The first two years were a difficult time, I wanted to be alone, I shut myself off from everyone and I was very depressed."

Something happened to change all that when Dee was offered a parttime job. She went to work for an attorney who helped terminally ill patients and focused her energy on helping people. Eventually she reinstated her real estate license and became a loan officer.

Something else happened in 2000 to give Dee a renewed lease on life. Her granddaughter, Valyn, was born. A spitting image of Valerie Ann with her blonde hair, blue eyes and sweet smile, Dee felt Valyn was much more than the birth of a child, but truly a gift from God. "She even gives Valerie hugs," smiles Dee.

In 1999 Dee and her brother Chris began the Valerie Ann Hyde Memorial Golf Tournament in memory of her daughter.

"Valerie is just too special to be forgotten and she had so many friends," Dee says. "This tournament began as a way to provide scholarships for her friends."

Dee copes with Christmas by buying presents for Valerie's friends in Valerie's name.

For the most part, Dee is upbeat and positive and says, "I realized if the reverse had happened, I would want Valerie to be happy, so I try not to be sad for her."

Emily Ann Rolling's love of theater prompted Ann and husband Norm to help create a permanent outdoor theater at the high school in her memory.

The Rollings acquired five acres of land on Ranch Road 2325, directly behind the school. With the help of students, friends, family, and community volunteers they turned the land into a venue for Wimberley High's acclaimed summer Shakespeare festival, naming it the EmilyAnn Theatre in their daughter's honor.

Hours of donated labor made the ongoing project a reality. Volunteers reached out to the Rollings by clearing brush, building trails, pouring concrete, building the stage, landscaping, building fountains, planting, and with maintenance.

"At first it was just going to be a slab and in August 1998 the first Shakespearean play was presented on the outdoor stage. We had no idea what it would turn into," Ann says.

Every August, students rehearse, make costumes and props, construct backdrops and spend many hours perfecting the plays they will present for two weeks.

The park-like setting at EmilyAnn also provides the location for other events. In April more than 4,500 butterfly art exhibits can be seen and thousands of butterflies are released at the annual Butterfly Day. *Star of the Hills*, a musical based on the early days of Wimberley is presented in June, the Wimberley Gospel Music Festival in September, and the Trail of Lights in December.

More than 60 businesses, organizations and families adopt a spot at the Trail of Lights and decorate from the parking lot to the flagpole at the top of the hill. Surrounding the flagpole are pavers with the names and dates of Wimberley youngsters who have lost their lives.

Those who have lost loved ones also bring ornaments to the Remembrance Tree on the Trail of Lights. Those families get together at an annual picnic to take comfort in being with others who have lost someone special.

Both mothers agree that losing each daughter was very painful, but through their



Ann Rolling and Dee Banks. Photo by Madonna Kimball

projects dedicated to Valerie and Emily, they will "never stop loving, never forget."

FYI • The Valerie Ann Hyde Memorial Golf Tournament will be held on June 5 next year at the Canyon Lake Golf Club. The Trail of Lights at Emily Ann Theatre is open nightly till 11:00 through January 4th. For more information call EmilyAnn Theatre at 512-847-6969 or www.emilyann.org.



Valerie Ann Hyde