

Triathletes raise funds for patient care in memory of woman who died

By Christina Littlefield
Staff writer

Grant LaVigna of Ventura continues to remember his sister's last wishes.

Dina LaVigna died four years ago at the age of 33 from disorders related to primary immunodeficiency, a genetic disease that leaves the immune system unable to fight common illnesses. In her last years, Dina expressed to her family her desire to improve patient care for the many young children diagnosed with the disease.

"She wanted to do something to brighten the environment where she and the children spent hours on end," Grant

LaVigna said.

LaVigna began a triathlon to remember his sister's birthday and raise money to improve patient care under the Breath of Life Fund set up by Dina's husband, Jeff Schmidt. The first triathlon involved only Grant LaVigna and a friend, but with support from others they raised more than \$8,000. The next year the triathlon expanded to 14 athletes and they raised more than \$15,000. This year, LaVigna is opening the triathlon to the public, with 50 participants already signed up for the July 14 event.

LaVigna expanded the triathlon — which involves a

half-mile swim, a 40K bike ride and a 10K run — to allow participants to compete in all three legs or run the race relay style. Everyone will get a T-shirt and a medallion for running the race, which begins at Marina Park in Ventura. The four top fund-raisers will receive special prizes. The entry fee — \$60 per team or \$25 per person — will go toward the Breath of Life Fund.

"The goal is to raise money for patient care," LaVigna said; her three other siblings help with the fund.

The Dina LaVigna Breath of Life is set up under an umbrella organization, the Jeffrey Modell Foundation, which is a research

and resource center for the treatment and care of people with primary immunodeficiency. The foundation matches the money raised in memory of Dina. She knew the Modell family, who lost Jeffrey to the disease, from her visits to Mount Sinai Hospital in New York.

Dina had spent many long hours in a tiny treatment room at the center, getting infusions that would boost her immune system. Many of the people she met were children, as the disease often goes undiagnosed and many don't survive until adulthood.

"She had to go through this treatment and sit there for

hours," Grant LaVigna said. "Mount Sinai is a great hospital but the area designated for treatment was dark and dreary."

Using the money from the first two triathlons, Dina's family was able to double the size of the treatment center at Mount Sinai, adding amenities such as reclining chairs, television, VCRs, computers with Internet access, a refrigerator, coffee maker, patient work station and a nurses' station. They hope to do the same thing at the UCLA Medical Center, because Dina went to school at the university.

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