

wee one foundation



a tribute to wayne otto, cgc's

When in need

For 10 years, the Wee One Foundation has been helping those in trying times.

BY JOHN WALSH

Ryan Kopke, golf course superintendent at New Albany (Ohio) Country Club, has been living a nightmare for the past two years.

It started when Kopke's wife felt pain in her abdomen and subsequently made several trips to the emergency room; but doctors couldn't determine the cause. After several CT scans and ultrasounds, doctors determined her appendix needed to be removed; but that didn't stop the pain. So after more tests and scans, they decided to remove her gall bladder.

Still the pain didn't subside. Only after exploratory surgery did doctors discover that Kopke's 35-year-old wife, Cara, had a golf-ball-sized tumor in her intestine. The doctors removed the tumor along with 18 inches of her intestine only to deter-

mine the cancer had reached stage 4 and metastasized into her lungs.

It's been crazy for the Kopke family since then. They have to deal not only with chemo treatments but also with the pressures of being new home owners, skyrocketing medical bills and having to take time off of work. On top of that, Cara lost her job at a floral shop because it went bankrupt.

"It was impossible to focus on my job with what was going on with Cara," Ryan Kopke says. "It was nerve-racking. I took a month's worth of vacation last year, but thankfully, the amazing people I work with donated 24 vacation days to me and gave me a monetary gift."

Kopke was stressed out about everything: medical bills (Cara's drugs alone cost \$8,000 every other week), his new home and how his wife's health would affect their 6-year-old son. It was a lot to deal with.

Joe Enciso, a sales representative for Floratine, knew it, too. That's why he recommended Kopke



The 10th Annual Wee One Foundation Golf Outing will be played Sept. 16th at Pine Hills CC in Sheboygan, Wis. Rod Johnson, CGCS, is the host superintendent. As of press time, spots were still available.

look into the Wee One Foundation. The foundation was developed as a tribute to Wayne Otto — who was superintendent at Ozaukee Country Club in Mequon, Wis., from 1969 to 2002 and died of pancreatic cancer in 2004. The Wee One Foundation aims to help golf course management professionals (or their dependents) who incur overwhelming medical expenses.

“One day in March 2012, I Googled it, and reached out,” Kopke says. “Cara and I wrote a letter and shared our story. Two weeks later a representative from the foundation called to let me know we’d be receiving a one-time monetary gift. I was blown out of the water. I’ve never had anyone be so nice to me.”

Looking out for each other

Since the Wee One Foundation’s inception in 2004, when friends of Otto banded together to assist him financially in his battle against cancer, the foundation’s membership has grown to more than 270 in 17 states. More importantly, the foundation has gifted almost \$600,000 to families in Ohio, Arizona, Missouri, Iowa, Illinois, Michigan, North Carolina, Idaho, Minnesota, California and Texas. It raises money through its membership, golf outings (including one at Pine Hills Country Club in Sheboygan, Wis., annually) and sponsorships.

“People in the golf industry have always rallied around sick people for fundraising, but there was nothing permanent or beyond the needs of an individual,” says Luke Cella, executive director of the Wee One

Foundation (the name stems from a trip to Scotland, where the caddies were making wagers as golfers stood on the tee and one caddie declared, ‘My money’s on the

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Kelly Kressler
Southmoore Golf Course, Bath, PA

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wee one!"). "The group evolved as they saw fit and crafted a mission statement. The foundation's gifts aren't insurance plans or for families recovering from the loss of a loved one. They didn't want to fall into that."

In addition to the WGCSA, the foundation partners with other local chapters in states such as Minnesota, Illinois, Michigan, Kentucky, Indiana and Virginia to raise funds.

"We're gaining traction," says Cella, a former superintendent who also runs the Chicagoland and Midwest GCSA chapters. "It'd be a wonderful goal to have all local chapters be part of the foundation."

"WHEN A GIFT HAPPENS, IT REALLY HITS HOME. THE IMPACT OF THE FOUNDATION DOESN'T CLICK UNTIL SOMEONE BENEFITS FROM A GIFT."

Luke Cella

Recipients don't have to be members of the foundation to receive funds, which often are turned around quickly. The distribution of funds works through a benevolent committee on a case-by-case basis. The committee, which talks to as many people as possible, has never refused a request. Sixty-one people have been helped

since 2006, and 60 percent of those are superintendents. Five people have passed away. When gifts are given, no strings are attached, and recipients aren't stipulated to pay medical bills.

Funds can be used for items such as a hotel room so family can stay nearby; fuel (driving 100 miles to and from a hospital, for example); a wheelchair-accessible ramp; or a special van.

"When a gift happens, it really hits home," Cella says. "The impact of the foundation doesn't click until someone benefits from a gift."

Until this year, the foundation didn't invest its money. Funds came in and went out. But it started a 1-percent endowment campaign to fund the foundation long term, with a goal of \$10 million in 10 years.

"The 1 percent idea came from everybody giving the same. We're all in it together, equal sacrifice," Cella says.

Still, several challenges to growing the foundation remain, such as obtaining long-term commitments from people, and slower responses from people to trust and give.

Even though the bulk of the founda-

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"It'd be a wonderful goal to have all local chapters be a part of the foundation," Cella says. The foundation's membership has grown to 270 in 17 states, and gifted almost \$600,000, according to Cella.

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tion's support is through superintendents, which makes it a grass-roots organization, it has had support from suppliers from the start. Those include Becker Underwood, Turf Ventures, Barenbrug Seed, Blue Petroleum and Floratine, which is giving \$5,000 a year for the next 10 years.

"Companies don't want to make a long-term commitment," Cella says. "We'd like it to grow faster than it does, so every little bit helps."

The foundation will mark its 10-year anniversary in a rather low-key way — on some of its signage and within its general promotion.

"It will be kept simple because the people involved from the get-go only want to draw attention to the foundation to make sure funds are available to help others," Cella says. "This is just the beginning to make sure it's always around and viable for those who might need assistance."

Thankful and appreciative

For the Kopkes, life has settled a bit. But by no means is their future certain. Ryan Kopke is thankful he works for a facility that practices a family-first mentality. His crew stepped up to pick up the slack after he had to begin tending to his wife. And the club's general manager and director of golf course maintenance told him not to worry about the golf course and do what he needs to do.

"Everyone has been more than accommodating," he says.

As for Cara Kopke, she experienced nerve damage in her hands and feet as a result of her first type of chemo and felt like she was walking on pins and needles.

She also experienced temperature sensitivity, so anything she ate, drank or touched had to be room temperature. Every two months she has a CT scan to monitor the cancer in her lungs.

After a year of the chemo she had to start a different type of chemo when tumors started growing again. The new, powerful drug knocks her out for days.

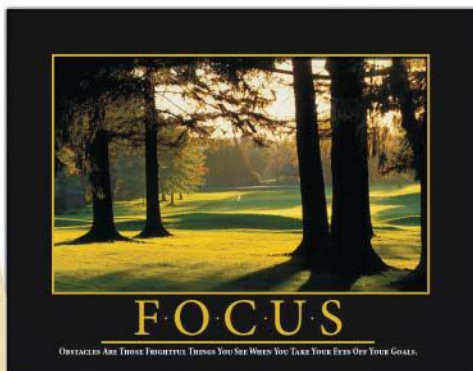
After seeing 15 pea- to BB-sized tumors in her lungs, doctors explained surgery and radiation aren't options because those treatments are too risky. The future is uncertain, but the Kopkes are being as strong as possible in this trying time.

"I'll tell anyone who wants to know what's going on," Ryan Kopke says, adding that no one at New Albany was familiar with the foundation before he found out about it. "Wee One has helped my family during this difficult time in our lives, and we appreciate it." ☺

John Walsh is a freelance writer based in Cleveland, Ohio.

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