

Park to be built as a memorial to teen killed in biking accident

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Ryan McDonnell was an altar boy at Our Lady of Victory Church, an honor student at Arbutus Middle School, an inseparable friend of his fraternal twin brother, Sean, and an avid fan of Baltimore Orioles shortstop Cal Ripken.

"His dream was to meet him, and he never did," said Ryan's mother, Pat McDonnell, 43.

The 13-year-old died when he was struck by two automobiles on March 25 while biking with his brother in the 4700 block of Leeds Ave. in Arbutus. To keep Ryan's memory alive, friends and neighbors will break ground for a park in his honor, Ryan Memorial Gardens, at 2 p.m. today.

"To have a park in his memory, I think he would be thrilled," Mrs. McDonnell said.

At first, she said, she was taken aback by suggestions of a park dedicated to Ryan. "You always know what your child means to you, but you never know what he means for other people," she said.

The half-acre site at Maiden Choice Lane and Leeds Ave., the street where Ryan died, belongs to Baltimore County. The vacant lot, which once had a house on it, is in a flood plane.

It will be decorated with shrubs and trees, and eventually a sundial, plaque and possibly memorial bricks in the names of others. There may also be a bird or butterfly sanctuary, according to Eleanor VanDevender, Chairwoman of the Greening Committee of Maiden Choice Community Association. A \$6,275 grant to create the park came from the Baltimore County Community Conservation program, which was established to aid the county's older communities. The community had to match 25 percent of that with in-kind labor donations, Ms. VanDevender said.

"We'd like to have a living memorial for our community, and we thought this would be a way for people to remember bicycle safety, and also a reminder to people of how precious our loved ones are, once they go by and see his name," said Ms. VanDevender.

Initially Mrs. McDonnell wasn't sure how her surviving son Sean would react to the park because he was present when Ryan died. She worried that it might bring up painful memories.

"But he said, 'The park celebrates Ryan's life,' and that's really true," Mrs. McDonnell declared.

She said recovering from Ryan's death has been difficult for the family, which includes Sean, her husband, Jim, 38, and Brigid, their 7-year-old daughter.

According to police reports, Ryan was riding with his brother at the intersection of Greystone Road and Leeds Avenue about 5:15 on March 25 when he yelled out, "I'm going too fast, I can't slow down!" He went through a stop sign and was struck by two different drivers. Ryan was pronounced dead at St. Agnes Hospital.

"I know he has gone on and that he's in heaven and in a better place, but it's very difficult for us. We just kind of live each day. . . . You know now that life is very short," Mrs. McDonnell said.

She said Sean will not allow anything of Ryan's in the bedroom they shared to be altered -- including the posters of Cal Ripken on the floor that were going to be rehung or the stuffed animals on his lower bunk bed.

Meanwhile, the community has pitched in to meet the county's requirement that the park be locally maintained. Tree-Mendous Trees a program that encourages communities to plant trees, sold about 50 trees at about cost (\$15 each) to the community association. A Lansdowne boy scout troop agreed to maintain the park. East Coast Electric in Reisterstown has donated electrical services so a blue spruce can be lighted when the park officially opens Dec. 4, and a horticulture teacher at Lansdowne High School agreed to do the landscaping design and donate the blue spruce.