

Mother leads pajama drive in memory of her son

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Roosevelt and Sabrina Umstead Smith of Sicklerville sit with pajama packages they will donate to children being treated at Cooper University Hospital. Sabrina Umstead Smith founded Erick's Place, which donates pajamas to kids in hospitals. The organization is named for her son, who died at 3 after being born with underdeveloped lungs, cerebral palsy and a host of other medical issues. / Chris LaChall/Courier-Post

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Here's the last thing Sabrina Umstead Smith remembers of the night her promising, conventional life ended.

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It was Oct. 14, 1988 and Smith was six months pregnant with her first child. She kissed her young husband, Eric, goodnight and went to bed. He stayed up to watch baseball, she recalls.

She never saw him alive again after that.

Sometime during the night, fire broke out across the hall from the Umsteads' third-floor apartment in Brooklyn. Some say it started with matches; others claim it was drug-related. The result was smoke so smothering, the couple couldn't escape their apartment. Rescuers found them huddled by their front door, Eric covering his 31-year-old wife's body with his own.



Erick Umstead was born nearly four months after the fire that killed his father and injured his mother. He spent most of his brief life in hospitals and on 24-hour care at home. / CHRIS LaCHALL/Courier-Post

HOW TO HELP

~ Volunteers are invited to a Pajama Packing Party tonight from 6:30 to 8 p.m. at the Vogelson Branch of the Camden County Library, 203 Laurel Road, Voorhees. The event, sponsored by the Erick J. Umstead Memorial Foundation, will provide new pajamas to pediatric patients being treated at Cooper University Hospital in Camden. Pajamas being packaged tonight have been donated by various individuals and purchased with a grant from the accounting firm Ernst & Young.

~ For more information, visit

www.ericksplace.org

or email sabrina@ericksplace.org.

Call the library at (856) 772-1636.

He died July 9, 1992.

He was a happy little boy, says Smith, now 55 and remarried. But his little body had been through so much.

Two years after Erick's death - having been so mired in tending her sick son - Smith felt the weight of loss begin to smother her like smoke from that deadly apartment fire. She came close to a nervous breakdown, made worse by her mother's passing in 2003.

During years of grief therapy, she was once asked, What is Erick's legacy?+

They were presumed dead. But Timothy Higgins - a New York firefighter who later perished at the World Trade Center on 9/11 - resuscitated the couple and they were rushed to a Bronx hospital.

It had not been for his heroic efforts, I would not be talking to you today, says Smith, who awoke three days later to hear the tragic details she couldn't remember herself.

Sometimes, even now, I do try to recall and I can't, adds the Sicklerville resident. It's like having a part of your life erased.

Smith recovered, but her husband of less than a year died a month later without ever waking up.

And there was her unborn son. Doctors said his mother's smoke inhalation had compromised little E and they recommended an abortion. But his grandmother Mattie Gore, of Philadelphia, wouldn't hear of it.

Nearly four months later, Erick Umstead was born with underdeveloped lungs, cerebral palsy and a host of other medical issues. He spent the rest of his brief life in and out of hospitals and on 24-hour care at home with his indomitable mother and grandmother.

Today - six years after Smith retired from the job whose benefits paid Erick's monstrous medical bills - the answer is pajamas.

A foundation named for her son and run by Smith and her second husband, Roosevelt, collects new, donated PJs for pediatric patients, more than 300 pairs over the last three years.

At the Camden County Library's Voorhees branch tonight, volunteers are invited to help pack PJs for delivery to Cooper University Hospital.

Other recipients of Erick's Place donations have included Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, where Erick and his mother were regulars; Voorhees Pediatric Facility for chronically ill children, where he lived for six months; and Providence House domestic violence shelter in Delran.

The need for pajamas of all sizes is just so imperative for our program, says Rachel Johnston, community affairs coordinator for Providence. (Erick's Place) not only provided pajamas, but they included notes for the kids and things like joke books.

It was over the top and very thoughtful.

It's taken on a life of its own, Smith marvels of the foundation, which administers three other programs geared toward medical needs.

We just about lived at CHOP. I'm so grateful for that, and that's why we're doing what we do - to help those families that don't have the resources we did.

She's a good person, Johnston says of Smith.

Smith replies she did what any parent would have over the years, despite the blaze that killed her young husband and eventually took their son.

We moms, she acknowledges, we do what we have to do.