

Swim-a-thon is a family affair

By Brian Saxton
THE NEWS-TIMES
March 23, 2007

BROOKFIELD -- A Brookfield man who met his future wife in a swimming pool during their college years will return to the water today, raising money in her memory.

Donna Ragatz, 37, died from cancer in January after a lifetime of service with the YMCA in six states, which included teaching children to swim and compete.

"Swimming played a very large part in her life," her husband, Bill Ragatz, 38, said Thursday. "It was a sport we both enjoyed our entire lives."

Today at Brookfield's Greenknoll YMCA, Donna Ragatz's work for the agency will be honored with a swim-a-thon that will help raise money for Camp Greenknoll's new \$2.9 million regional aquatic center pool project.

"I think it's a wonderful way to honor my wife and it will be good for the community, too," Bill Ragatz said. "It's also fitting because both of us were always very active in the YMCA over the years."

Bill Ragatz, a regional accounts manager for Boehringer Ingelheim Pharmaceuticals in Ridgefield, plans to swim laps with dozens of other adults and youngsters who have received monetary pledges of support.

His daughter, Ali, 5, hopes to swim 10 laps in Greenknoll's 25-yard indoor pool and son, Jeffrey, 8, is aiming for 40.

"I'm excited about it," Ali Ragatz said. "It's a nice way to remember my mom."

Donna and Bill Ragatz met during swim practice as members of the Iowa State University team.

"We literally met in the pool and it kind of went on from there," said Bill Ragatz, who graduated in 1991.

After Donna Ragatz graduated in 1992, she became program director and head swim coach for the YMCA in Newton, Iowa. They were married in 1994 and later moved to Durham, N.C., where Donna Ragatz was the assistant aquatics director for the local YMCA.

When the couple came to Brookfield five years ago, Donna Ragatz became a volunteer at Center and Huckleberry Hill schools and an active member of the YMCA.

"Between the two of us we've worked for the YMCAs in Colorado, Wisconsin, Iowa, North Carolina, Pennsylvania and Connecticut," Bill Ragatz said.

Amy Ferrarie, one of the event's coordinators, said she expects more than 140 swimmers in all age groups from the Y's Mako swim team to take part in the three-hour fundraiser.

Other YMCA members and supporters are also expected to participate.

"She was a wonderful person and a phenomenal mom," Ferrarie said. "I think it will also teach young people how to remember and honor other people."

The agency's campaign to build a 50-meter, Olympic-length pool and aquatic center for year-round use at Camp Greenknoll was launched in November 2004.

Development director Greg Dembowski said Thursday that \$1 million of the \$1.5 million needed for the first phase has already been raised and construction of the pool began in October.

"We're planning to open it in June," Dembowski said.

Phase Two, which will enclose the pool, is expected to cost another \$1.4 million.

On Thursday, Bill Ragatz, a volunteer coach at the Greenknoll YMCA, thanked the agency and Brookfield residents for their support.

"My family feels blessed," Ragatz said. "This is such a caring community. They have helped us in so many ways."



Bill Ragatz, with daughter, Ali, 6, lost his wife, Donna, to cancer in January. Today, he plans to participate in a swim-a-thon to honor her memory and to help raise money for the Greenknoll YMCA's new aquatic center.