

SCGA to take over O'Neil charity tournament



O'Neil family to hand off charity event honoring son to SCGA

By Bob Buttitta

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The Ryan O'Neil Golf Classic blossomed 14 years ago from an outpouring of love for Ryan O'Neil, a Camarillo native and Rio Mesa High graduate who died suddenly of cardiac arrhythmia at age 24 in July 2000.

Friends and family, overwhelmed with a sense of loss, wanted to do something to remember Ryan. They started sending checks to Rio Mesa in his honor.

Administrators at Rio Mesa suggested to Mary O'Neil, Ryan's mom, and his older brother Lawrence that they talk to the Ventura County Community Foundation about starting a memorial fund.

"We essentially started a golf tournament because we didn't know what to do with all the money," Lawrence said. "Memorial tournaments usually have a life span of 2-3 years so there was no way I thought it would go 14."

From the outset, Mary and Lawrence decided all the money raised through the tournament would go to junior golf programs in Ventura County because one of Ryan's greatest passions was golf.

Over the last 13 years, the O'Neils have delivered more than \$300,000 to high school and junior golf programs around the county. But with Mary now in her 80s and Lawrence having a family of his own, the O'Neils decided the 2014 event would be the last one.

The problem was neither Mary nor Lawrence wanted it to end. They approached Mark Wipf, director of the Ventura County Junior Golf Association, about the VCJGA taking over. The VCJGA does not have the staff needed to take on such a large project and continue to run its own tournaments.

Wipf and Dan Martin and Jon Gomez, both of whom also run large junior programs in the area, approached the Southern California Golf Association to see if it might run the tournament through its Youth on Course program.

Over the last 10 years, YoC has supported local junior programs like the VCJGA, Martin's Golf Academy of Ventura County, and Gomez's Training on Wheels.

"As far as we know, there are no other fundraising events for junior golf in the area," said Robbie Matz, program director for the YoC. "Losing such great support for these programs would be a travesty. Thankfully, Mary and Lawrence were extremely supportive and generous to allow YoC to continue the tournament for years to come.

"Our goal is to keep the tournament's identity the same and continue to honor Ryan's legacy. We hope that we can provide resources to expand fundraising efforts while providing players with the same family feel they are accustomed to."

The tournament goes on, with this year's event slated for Monday at Las Posas Country Club.

All money raised will continue to stay in Ventura County to support junior golf, something Mary and Lawrence insisted on.

“We’re excited about the prospect of someone taking what we have started and growing it,” Lawrence said. “The SCGA has such great connections that will have the ability to draw players from all over and really do some big things with it.”

Mary said much of the credit for the tournament’s success and growth goes their fellow members at Las Posas Country Club, who have contributed their time, money and the use of their club.

Mary said one example was members using their own golf carts which saved the tournament from having to rent more

“As people got too old to play, they have continued to come to the dinner and supported us that way,” Mary said. “The club, the staff and the members have treated this like their event. It’s meant so much to us.”

The tournament has brought some solace for the O’Neil family.

“When you go through a hard time and you have so many people support your event and show how much they care, it really helps you a lot,” Lawrence said. “When the community shows it cares, you feel that love and it helps.

“Through this Ryan’s spirit lives on. We feel him here, so it’s great it will continue.”

Anyone interested in playing Monday, can contact Lawrence O’Neil at 805-701-1818.

