

A GARDEN FOR THEIR SON



Chuck and Shelley Levchak at their home in Kirkwood on Oct. 11. Shortly after their son C.J. died of a heroin overdose in 2016, they began work on a garden to his memory. The garden is in the same location C.J.'s swing set was. PATRICK OEHLER/STAFF PHOTO

Kirkwood couple keep his name alive with memorial



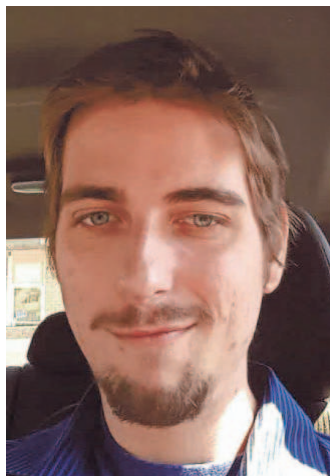
STORIES TO SHARE
KATIE SULLIVAN

Behind Chuck and Shelley Levchak's Kirkwood home, in the center of their wide green lawn, is a memorial.

Large gray rocks from the family's Pennsylvania farm encircle a stone mosaic patio. There is a ring of boldly colored flowers, a handcrafted fire pit and, behind it, a white swing.

At first glance, this space is another example of the Levchaks' charming backyard landscaping, but tiny details — a seal from Donate Life America, a plant from a kidney recipient, a memorial stone — typify this space's significance, a tribute to the Levchaks' 26-year-old son, CJ, and a labor of love his parents have toiled over since he died.

Charles Joseph Levchak, known as CJ, died March 8, 2016, of a heroin overdose.



C.J. Levchak, of Kirkwood, died on March 8 at age 26. PROVIDED PHOTO

How they coped

In the weeks after the three hospital-confined days they spent with their only child, Chuck and Shelley Levchak received an outpouring of support.

The parents didn't think twice about including their son's cause of death in his obituary, they said.

"I wasn't ashamed of my son or how he died," Shelley wrote in a letter. "He wasn't a heroin addict to us, he was a kindhearted young man and always had been."

CJ's parents had asked in his obituary that, in lieu of flowers, those wishing consider donating to the Front Street Dog Shelter or the Broome County Humane Society in their son's name, and many did, they said, but the couple also received a stream of donations from family members, friends and coworkers.

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Garden

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“We didn’t know what to do with it,” Chuck Levchak said, “so we decided on a garden.”

That summer, mere months after their son’s passing, they started building.

Chuck Levchak took trips down to his father’s farm in Starrucca, Pennsylvania, sometimes on the weekends, also on early weekday mornings. He loaded up the bed of his blue pickup truck with enormous rock slabs and spent the rest of those days cutting and arranging them in the center of the yard.

He built stone steps up to the circular space where he laid a stone mosaic.

They spent entire weekends working on the garden, selecting and planting flowers, then planting more, all through that first summer and into the second.

“That’s kind of how we got through the summer,” Shelley Levchak said. “I don’t know how (Chuck) would’ve survived, or I, if we weren’t doing this.”

A dedication to CJ

It was Chuck’s idea to fasten wooden beams, paint them white and affix a wooden swing, the only store-bought piece of this garden.

Two decades ago, another swing stood in this spot, part of a playground swing set the Levchaks set up for their young son to enjoy. CJ had enjoyed swinging since infancy, his mother said, back when they had another small swing in the garage.

But once CJ grew older, the swing set went away, and this space in the yard sat vacant.

“We just wanted to do something for dedication to CJ,” Shelley Levchak said.

The swing, Chuck thought, would be fitting.

There are other gifts in the garden, from friends and family members.

A small circular stone on which is etched the message,



C.J. Levchak’s parents built a memorial garden for him at their home in Kirkwood. KATIE SULLIVAN/STAFF PHOTO



Chuck and Shelley Levchak on the bed of their son C.J., who died from a heroin overdose in 2016. The quilt was made from C.J.’s T-shirts. PATRICK OEHLER/STAFF PHOTO

“When someone you love becomes a memory, the memory becomes a treasure,” sits in the green pebbles. A gift from a friend.

A step or two away, there’s a plant blooming delicate pink flowers, given to the Levchaks

by CJ’s aunt, Betty McLean, who received one of CJ’s kidneys. That donation is recognized in a bronze emblem on the white post of the swing, the Gift of Life Medal of Honor awarded by New York State and Donate Life America.

“They came to us and both of us said, ‘Yes,’ immediately because we knew he’d want to,” Shelley said of their decision to donate their son’s organs.

Every gift, every stone and flower serve a simple purpose for the Levchaks: to keep their son’s name alive.

‘Living in a fog’

While a memorial garden grew and transformed outside, inside the Levchak home, CJ’s parents have preserved his memory in his bedroom, where everything has remained the same since the day he died.

“It’s hard on families,” Shelley Levchak said. “People don’t get that. Hopefully one day they will.”

On the wall, the same words CJ’s mother wrote on the first page of his recovery book, words that would later serve as the last line of CJ’s obituary, are spelled out in a wall decal: “If I had to choose between loving you or breathing, I would use my last breath to tell you I love you.”

“He was someone’s child and people shouldn’t judge,” she

said. “They never know when it could happen to them or their family.”

Two blankets are spread over CJ’s bed, made from a collection of his T-shirts.

CJ’s grandfather’s flannel shirt, the one his mother says he wore all the time, hangs over his desk chair. His shoes are there beside the bed, the coat his parents gave him for Christmas is hanging in the closet.

Besides cleaning it, Shelley Levchak says she’s kept the room exactly the same.

“You are living in a complete fog the first year,” Shelley said. “And then the second year is so much worse because you’re coming out of the fog and you’re realizing, they’re not coming back.”

What’s helped, she’s found, is keeping her son’s name “out there.”

A weeping cherry tree has been planted in CJ’s honor, outside McGirk’s Irish Pub in Binghamton, where he worked. A memorial plaque is on its way, Shelley Levchak said.

The Levchaks are donating the money they didn’t use for the garden to Truth Pharm, a local nonprofit advocacy organization, and the Broome County Chapter of The Compassionate Friends, an organization supporting families who’ve suffered the loss of a child.

Three months after what would’ve been CJ’s 28th birthday, the Levchaks say the garden is still a work in progress. In the fall of 2016, Chuck constructed a stone fire pit in the center of it all.

This year they planted even more flowers, and soon they’ll plant more.

“You always want to do something for your child,” Shelley Levchak said. “You just want to keep their name alive, you don’t want people to forget him. And this certainly does that.”

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