

# T-Baum Foundation grants 14 wishes

■ *Founder faces similar situation as the people she and her husband help*

By CAROL POMEDAY

Ozaukee Press staff

Since 2003, Jean and Pat Birenbaum of Belgium have granted wishes to 14 adults with life-threatening conditions through the T-Baum Foundation. They started the foundation in memory of their son Tyler, who died of a brain tumor June 4, 2000, two days after his 16th birthday.

Now Jean is facing a similar situation as the people the foundation has helped. She was recently diagnosed with uterine cancer and had a hysterectomy Sept. 13. The cancer usually occurs in women 60 or older. Jean is 49.

She received good news. The cancer had not spread to her lymph nodes and she will not need chemotherapy. Before surgery, she was told there was a 90% chance the cancer had not spread, but she was understandably skeptical.

"I looked at the doctor and said, 'We've heard that before,'" Jean said.

That's what they were told when Tyler underwent surgery to remove his tumor.

Jean was calm going into the surgery, but her husband was worried.

"The worst thing that would happen is I'll be with Tyler again," Jean said.

The news alarmed people who know the Birenbaums, including those who had been granted T-Baum wishes.

"Who is going to grant Jean's wish?" asked Carmella Schmidt of Random Lake, who is battling gall bladder cancer and recently received lawn furniture, a pier and landscaping from the foundation.

Only God, Jean replied.

"I believe in the power of prayer," she said.

Jean learned she may have Lynch syndrome caused by an inherited gene that predisposes people to colorectal and related cancers at earlier ages than normally found. Four of her siblings had cancer.

Three brothers were diagnosed this year — two with colon cancer and one with lung cancer. A younger sister had colon cancer.

It is possible Tyler inherited the gene because brain cancer is among those linked to the gene according to the Mayo Clinic's Web site, Jean said. Tyler's cancer is usually found in men 60 or older.

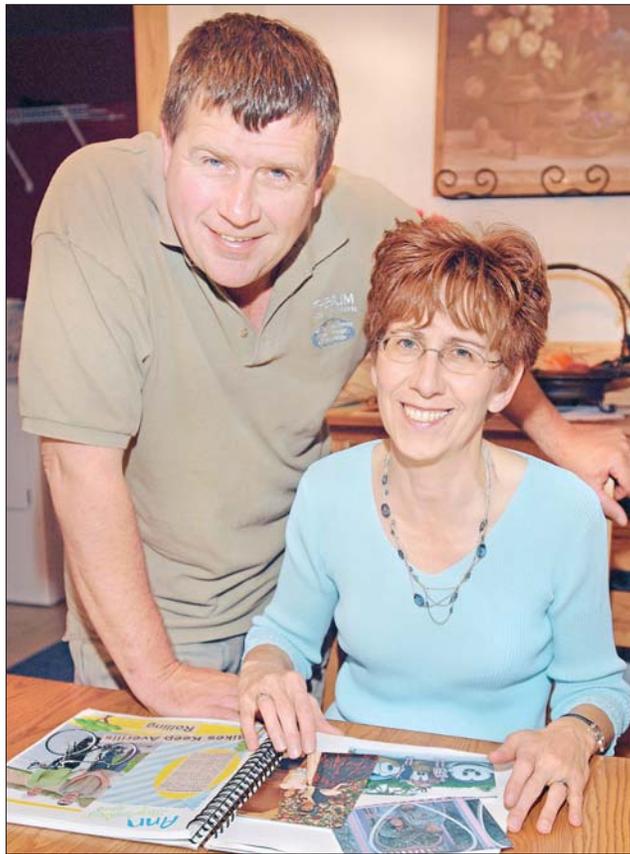
Jean and her daughter Briana will be tested for the gene.

The Birenbaums started the T-Baum Foundation because there are agencies that grant children's wishes — the Make-A-Wish Foundation granted Tyler's wish to visit Washington, D.C. — but they knew of no organization that did the same thing for adults.

When they approach someone about a wish, the initial reaction is almost always the same — "No, I'm not going to die."

"I said 'no' to Make-A-Wish the first time because I thought to say 'yes' would be admitting Tyler would die," Jean said.

"We tell them they're dealing with something very serious and we want to make them forget about it for a while and have fun. That's how it was with us. Tyler



**A SCRAPBOOK FILLED** with photographs of T-Baum Foundation grant recipients was enjoyed by Pat and Jean Birenbaum, who started the foundation in memory of their son Tyler, who died of cancer at age 16. Jean was recently diagnosed with cancer.

Photo by Sam Arendt

was just a kid for a while away from all the doctors and hospitals."

Jean said she tries not to get as personally involved as her husband with wish recipients, but that doesn't always work. They understand what the families are going through.

"We know the frustrations of going to the hospital for one test and you're there all day or have to stay overnight," Jean said. "We know how overwhelming it is when you get all the phone calls and have to explain over and over again what's happening."

Initially, wishes were granted for up to \$5,500. That was recently increased to \$7,500. People with life-threatening illnesses who live in surrounding small communities that have raised at least \$1,000 for the foundation are eligible for the grants.

The Birenbaums have sent people on cruises, to Alaska, Disney World and for spa weekends. They have provided whirlpools, big-screen televisions, bicycles and all-terrain vehicles.

"We always get big discounts. Many times people donate the labor," Pat said. "We have met some of the nicest people."

"It's fun and we try to add a surprise," Jean said.

Perhaps the person most surprised was Ann Averill, a physical-education teacher at Random Lake High School and mother of five children who learned she had a cancerous tumor on her heart when she was seven months pregnant. Surgery was not possible because the tumor was intertwined through the heart.

She refused chemotherapy until her

baby was born. Isaac was born June 4, 2006, by Caesarean section six weeks premature weighing 4 pounds, 2 ounces. His lungs were not fully developed and he was in the intensive care unit for four days, but he's now a healthy, active toddler.

Averill started chemotherapy the day after giving birth. That was followed by radiation and two more rounds of chemotherapy and radiation.

The tumor has disappeared.

Averill's wish was to have a road bicycle. The Birenbaums decided she should also have a mountain bike and a Burley to pull Isaac and Jack, 2-1/2.

After she got her bikes at Bicycle Works in Sheboygan Falls, Pat told the rest of the family to pick out bikes.

Averill's husband John, daughters Alexandria, 17, and Frankie, 14, and son Tony, 12, all have new bicycles and enjoy riding together.

"It's amazing what that kind of gesture does," Averill said. "It shows my children you can meet a stranger and be compassionate and caring. They have been so good to us."

Averill is teaching part-time this year and gaining back her strength.

Her husband was so grateful he provided the landscaping labor for Schmidt's project. She took a sick leave from her food service job at Random Lake schools while undergoing chemotherapy and radiation.

"The Birenbaums are such wonderful people," Schmidt said. "Pat's such a compassionate man. He says the right thing. He's been an amazing gift to me."

"Jean took my daughter shopping for a charm bracelet for me and she had such a good time."

The Birenbaums spend what they raise each year and keep detailed records, something that is more time consuming than they envisioned.

The foundation's biggest fund-raisers are the Green Heart Run and Walk sponsored by St. Mark Lutheran Church during Luxembourg Fest and home-run sponsorships for the Friday night softball league in Belgium. Sponsors donate \$10 for each home run.

"When we started this, I knew it would sell itself. In small communities, people want to help each other. People are willing to give," Pat said.

He thought the hardest part would be raising the money, but it isn't. The hardest part is losing a friend.

About half the wish recipients have died. Each death brings back the pain of losing Tyler, Pat said.

Each survivor provides hope.

Information is available on the Web site [www.t-baum.org](http://www.t-baum.org).



**WISH RECIPIENT** Carmella Schmidt and her husband Brian enjoyed new deck furniture, a pier and landscaping at their Random Lake home (above photo). Bicycles and a child trailer fulfilled the wish expressed by Ann Averill, who took a ride with her husband John and sons John, 2-1/2, and Isaac, 18 months (right photo). Her two daughters and another son also received bicycles from the foundation.

Photos by Sam Arendt





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