

Surfers, skaters keep Brendan Borek's memory alive more than 20 years after Avalon teen died of cancer

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By LEE PROCIDA Staff Writer

AVALON — Mark Ruggiano remembers how cool it was skateboarding with Brendan Borek on the Avalon teen's vert ramp in the mid-'80s.

"He was the Joneses," Ruggiano said, as in the phrase "keeping up with the Joneses." "He had the ramp, the surf thing down the street. All the local guys, they had that tight-knit group."

Borek, an avid skater and surfer, died in 1991 at 18 of bone cancer, but Ruggiano said his strong core of friends is one reason his memory has lived on more than 20 years later through the Brendan Borek High



Photo by Andrew Renneisen

Jason Hickman, 13, of Erma, grinds a rail during the Method Skate Jam on Friday at the Avalon Skate Park, an event held as part of the Brendan Borek High Tides Memorial.

Tides Memorial Fund.

The group raises money to help families in Cape May County who have a loved one suffering with pediatric cancer, helping to pay for necessities such as food and travel as they deal with mounting medical bills.

Of the more than \$200,000 in total support the fund has received in recent years, much of

it comes from the week of events they hold every year in Avalon. This year's schedule culminates today with "The Brendan" Surf Memorial at the 30th Street beach.

More than 210 surfers are expected to paddle out this year to take part in the ceremony on the water, which includes reading the names of about 100 people whom the fund has supported and have since died.

This year, the organization is also cooperating with the Travis Manion Foundation and Operation Amped, which holds events for amputee war veterans to learn how to surf. There is also the annual Homecoming Party from 4 to 8 p.m. at Avalon Community Hall.

Over the years, the group has raised more than \$1.6 million to support about 170 families over its two decades of existence, said Lydia Borek, Brendan's mother.

"I always say Brendan was cheated out of a lot of life, but the life he did have he loved," she said Friday.

Ruggiano calls Lydia "the Kool-Aid mom" — always warm and welcoming when a swarm of kids came over to use Brendan's skate ramp.

She said she remembers those days, too.

"You kids are going to get me in trouble," she said she remembers telling them. "I don't have insurance for this! Every kid in the county must have skated on it once."

The fund was originally Borek's idea, and she is still an integral part of it, along with Brendan's younger brother, David, and a large cast of others.

Mary Kane, Brendan's former tutor, is one of the other officers in the organization. Dave Haberle, a former director of recreation in Avalon, is the group's event coordinator, whom Borek said has taken an increasingly large role over the years.

And there are also the people such as Ruggiano who knew Borek, surfed and skated with him, and have helped out for years.

"When they were putting it together, I felt like it was an obligation for me to give back," he said.

Another of those longtime supporters and former friends is Scott Soens, a cinematographer who filmed "Come Hell or High Water," an award-winning surf movie that was shown Friday night at the Community Hall.

The rest of the week's events included an art show Tuesday at the Avalon Yacht Club and various benefits held at area restaurants such as Sylvester's Fish Market, Circle Pizza and Fishin' Pier Grille.

Friday's events included the annual Method Skate Jam, during which Ruggiano, the owner of Method Skate in Sea Isle City, handed out Vitamin Waters to the participants.

Ruggiano is now in his early 40s, but he was about the same age nearly 30 years ago as many of the skaters at Friday's event who are now carrying on the tradition Brendan and his friends started.

"Which for us is great, because that's the future of it," Lydia Borek said.

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