

THIS COUNTRY: FOUNDATION RAISES \$120,000 From the tragic past, Gainey looks to the future

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'It was like a communal wake.' Bob Gainey was not speaking this night as a member of the Hockey Hall of Fame nor as general manager of the Montreal Canadiens - but as the husband who had lost a wife to cancer at 39, the father who had lost a daughter to the sea at 25.

It was indeed like a wake: St. Patrick's Day in the community theatre, beer cooling in the basement, a spunky daughter dancing a jig on the stage and John McDermott closing out the evening with a rendition of Danny Boy so stirring even the most hardened in attendance were glad the lights took a few extra moments to come up.

It had been billed as A Night with Gainey Family and Friends - but no one had a clue who the "friends" might be when the \$100 tickets went on sale back in November and still sold out immediately.

Organizer Ed Arnold of the Peterborough Examiner had hoped to raise as much as \$60,000 for the Gainey Foundation, which had been established last year to honour Cathy Gainey, who died of a brain tumour in June, 1995, and her daughter, Laura, who was swept from the deck of the Picton Castle in December, 2006.

And when it was over, when the tears had been wiped away and the beers in the basement were popping open, there was twice that amount: \$120,000 raised this evening to put toward that \$2-million level the family hopes to reach before Anna, the eldest of Bob and Cathy Gainey's four children, begins handing cheques over to young Canadians involved in the arts or the environment. Applications are now being accepted at www.gaineyfoundation.com.

The idea grew out of the tragedy that took the life of Laura just when it seemed she was finally finding herself after years of dealing with her mother's early death. The Picton Castle - sailing out of Lunenburg, N.S. - hit a storm off Cape Cod and Laura, heading out on deck without a flotation device or safety harness, had been swept overboard and lost.

It was a tragedy that forced one of the sports world's most private personalities to open himself up.

"There's a piece of me," Bob Gainey told The Globe and Mail last spring, "that would like to turn out the lights and deal with it on my own." But it was not just himself. There were the other children: Anna, just recently married, Stephen and Colleen, the dancing leprechaun this night, who was youngest and who had battled her own demons since that day when, as a five-year-old, she had to tell her father over the telephone that "Mommy's on the floor of the bathroom - and she's not moving!" And there was also the matter of the accident at sea, an initial investigation that was mysteriously shelved and a subsequent report that, in the end, Bob Gainey had to call a "whitewash." A third investigation, by the Transportation Safety Board, is now under way.

"One of the questions that comes up," says Gainey, "is 'Why?' Why do I give a damn if someone else is going back on that ship? Why are we doing this? Well, I think it's what Laura would do if it had happened to someone else on the boat. She would stand up and she would say all the things that were not done right.

"I have yet to run into a single sailor who has not said if there was a storm at sea you would be sure to have a clasp or a flotation device to be out on deck." He felt he had no alternative but to speak out.

"I kind of had to break through and explore that part of my personality and life more," he says. "That was part of the package. I knew that.

I had to accept it. It was what had to be done to allow us to leave behind the grieving and mourning for Laura." But if the investigation would look back, the Foundation would look ahead. "You decided to grieve with us and move on with us," Gainey told the 650 who packed the Showplace Performance Centre to see McDermott and a surprise appearance by the famous tenor's long-time friend, Murray McLachlan. But they also saw an impressive display of local talent including the local symphony orchestra and singers and musicians covering everything from country to the blues to hard rock - including an ensemble rendition of Laura's favourite Neil Young song, Rockin' in the Free World. Former NHLer and current hockey analyst Greg Millen came to host the show and another former NHL goalie, Glenn Healy, brought his pipe band up from Toronto to fill the stage and bring down the house with Amazing Grace. Yes, from Amazing Grace to Danny Boy - but worth remembering that cliches only become overused because they work.

Besides, what else would fit better on St. Patrick's Day and a wake involving two big Irish-Canadian Catholic families - Bob, one of five children, Cathy, the 15th of 19 - with both elderly matriarchs in attendance? John McDermott came for the simplest of reasons. In all the years that he had performed the national anthem, first at Maple Leaf Gardens and then the Air Canada Centre, there had only been one visiting coach and later general manager who never failed to search him out and thank him.

Bob Gainey.

"It's St. Patrick's Day, for God's sake," McDermott said when the beer was being set out.

"I had offers all over the place.

"But this one was a no-brainer."

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