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Family of 2012 car collision victim return to say 'thank you'

Refurbished waiting room to provide comfort to grieving families

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SAINT JOHN • Tears and warm memories were expressed for a teen who died in a 2012 car collision on Saturday as family and friends of Kyle Miotto returned to thank Saint John Regional Hospital staff for the first time since the incident.

On July 28, 2012, the Miotto family of Toronto had been attending a family reunion in Stanhope, P.E.I., and upon returning experienced a horrific single-vehicle collision near the Deerwood weigh scales on the Trans-Canada Highway outside Fredericton. The incident sent 17-year-old Kyle to hospital with a brain hemorrhage, but because of the severity of his injury, he had to undergo neurosurgery at the intensive care unit at the Saint John Hospital. For nine days, members of Kyle's family waited and hoped for his recovery in an unfamiliar city as Kyle was treated by neurosurgeon Dr. Brian Wheelock.

The implications of the accident were too much, however, and the teen died on Aug. 6, 2012.

Although it was a very sad ending to what had been a warm East Coast family reunion, mother Lynda-ann Labarge sought to find a silver lining by putting together a fundraising group called Team Kyle Builds. Over the past two years, money was raised to refurbish the family waiting room in the intensive care unit where she stayed. The small room on the main floor of the hospital now provides much more comfortable furniture and lighting, which is easier on the eyes for families who are in distress.

"We were so well cared for here by not just the medical staff, but everyone we dealt with – including our cab driver – and we were so overwhelmed by it," Labarge said. "When I went home after Kyle died, I went into a deep depression and shock. After six months I felt like I needed to do something to



Kyle Miotto's family and friends raised \$12,000 toward the refurbishment of the intensive care unit family waiting room, as well as neurological equipment. A photo of the boy will be hung in the room as a memorial for Miotto and new painting and dimmer lights will add emotional comfort to families in distress. From left: Kyle's aunt Kathryn Tonery, sister Alaska, cousin Emma Tonery and mother Lynda-ann Labarge. PHOTO: SIMON WHITEHOUSE/TELEGRAPH JOURNAL

help me, so I decided to do a fundraiser and build a waiting room so that other families who were travelling could have a place to sleep and have a comfortable place to be when they receive bad news."

Since the team was founded, fundraisers included a five-kilometre walk in Stanhope in July 2013, and one in Toronto shortly thereafter. More than \$12,000 was raised from both events, with \$5,000 going to the waiting room and the remainder to expensive neurological tools through the hospital foundation's 2013 The Give campaign.

On Saturday, 10 family members

and friends got to see the results of the room's upgrades completed earlier this year, which included a new navy blue paint job, four soft chairs with single beds pull-outs and dimmed lighting.

"It was beautiful and comforting and the colour was warm," said Labarge after visiting the room. "The most important thing for us was ensuring that it addressed sleep quality because my sister and I shared an old broken couch for nine nights and used the public bathroom during our stay."

Labarge's sister, Kathryn Tonery, said the difference in what she saw was like

night and day and was pleased with the new setting.

"When we were here it really felt like they had taken all the old furniture that nobody in all the other hospital departments wanted and shoved it into that room," Tonery said. "It felt like we were staying in the storage shed for a garage sale, with yellow light flickering in your eyes while the doctor was giving us the worst news possible. It was just awful."

Catherine Hinton, vice president of philanthropy with the Saint John Regional Hospital Foundation, greeted the family on Saturday and said the

waiting room badly needed upgrades since it had not seen major work since the hospital was opened in 1982. She said although the room is small, it is a place where families often receive bad news about loved ones. Hence creating an environment that provides emotional comfort in addition to the physical therapy of surgery is critical. A photo of Kyle's graduation photo will be placed on the wall to symbolize the hospital's dedication to this effort, she added.

"The photo and the waiting room are a living legacy to the number of families that will benefit," she said. "Every night there is a family using the family waiting room who will be grateful for that peaceful space."

The room also has a television, new carpeting, tile flooring and a small stereo. Hinton said the hospital is planning on adding a coffee maker and mini-fridge in the short term, and an expansion of the intensive care unit with more waiting space for families in the long term.

Hinton said when medical staff lose such a young person as Kyle, they often will take it very hard. Labarge said it was important for the family to reconnect with staff for this reason.

"It is difficult for everybody today, but I felt that we wanted to say thank you personally," Labarge said as her family and friend support wiped away tears. "We feel that their job is so hard with an environment where they see bad things happen, before the families pick up and leave quickly. There is no opportunity for them to (absorb it) and I think the job has a lot of burn-out."

Labarge, who had been driving the vehicle that Kyle was travelling in, said she has no memory of the incident and she and the other two passengers received only minor medical treatment.

"I have no memory of the accident, just that we flipped," she said. "I was very tired and I think I was falling asleep."

Since the incident, she returned to school at George Brown College to study grief and bereavement counselling. She hopes to one day offer emotional wellness counselling as the result from her personal tragedy.