

River of Hope Foundation Builds Hope for Cancer Patients

Nathan Heinert rallied his community to help a friend and now the nation.

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Nathan Heinert, former owner of a landscaping company in Dell Rapids, S.D., watched his friend, Bill Connor, endure the devastating loss of his son after a five-year battle with brain cancer. In 2004, just 20 days after his son passed away, Connor was diagnosed with leukemia.

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Nathan Heinert and several volunteers built this pond for his friend Bill Connor who was fighting leukemia.

[Click for larger image.](#) The backyard pond includes a wood bridge and a nearby fire pit.

[Click for larger image.](#) A view from the top of Bill Connor's water garden. Through shock, uncertainty and a range of

emotions, Heinert said he gained a profound understanding of how cancer affects the lives of those it touches. "On a daily, weekly, monthly, yearly basis, I was involved with this friend of mine and saw the ups and downs with him and his family," Heinert said. "I got to know how difficult this is on your mind, body and spirit."

To give his friend peace during the stressful recovery process, Heinert said he approached former colleagues for help in constructing a water feature in Connor's yard. The materials, plants and labor quickly were donated for the project.

"I think most people in the water garden industry will agree [that a water feature] creates a positive environment and gives you the positive mental state," Heinert said. "When you are able to relieve that stress, everything you do in life becomes easier to handle."

Somewhere between planning and building, Heinert said inspiration hit. "I found a lot of cancer centers across the country are tying in the nature aspect with their traditional medicine and focusing on the mind, body and spirit attack of treating cancer," Heinert said. From there, Heinert realized he could do this for more people than just Connor.

Heinert said he felt strongly about raising cancer awareness. By tying the project with a television show, Heinert said he could spread a message and highlight the beauty of water gardens.

With 15 people working on it, the project took about four days to complete. A local production company filmed the event and interviewed everyone involved, including medical doctors. The show aired on KSFY (ABC) covering Sioux Falls, S.D., on Aug. 28 and Nov. 20, 2008. Connor passed away on Sept. 2.

Shortly after the overwhelming response to the first show, Heinert established River of Hope Foundation in Sioux Falls. The nonprofit organization creates tranquil and healing retreats at the homes of nominated cancer patients.

"One of the last times Bill was able to communicate with anyone he said, 'I only got to enjoy this for a month, but it has given me so much peace and taken away so much stress and pain that I need you to continue doing this for other people in my situation,'" Heinert said. On Oct. 31, Heinert left his full-time job to devote his time to River of Hope Foundation.

"I am trying to take care of all aspects of running River of Hope Foundation — from the promotion, marketing and branding side to finding nominations, lining up projects and finding sponsors, contractors, etc.," he said.

Heinert credited Chris Lee, owner of Rock Garden Nursery in Sioux Falls, as instrumental in helping River of Hope Foundation move forward. According to Heinert, Lee donated everything asked of him for Connor's project and committed himself to doing whatever it takes to make River of Hope Foundation successful.

Avera Cancer Institute provided financial assistance, and other Sioux Falls businesses donated time, materials and assistance to spread River of Hope Foundation's message. "It's been inspiring to see how people will go to that extra level to help get it going and out there," Heinert said.

River of Hope Foundation plans to complete six residential pond and water garden projects, complete with television shows, by the end of 2009. River of Hope Foundation's long-term goals include large-scale pond and water garden projects such as cancer centers and parks. Heinert said he envisions River of Hope Foundation as a nationally recognized organization in cities across the United States. With billions of dollars spent each year on cancer treatment and prevention research, River of Hope Foundation aims to improve the quality of life for those living with the disease today, Heinert said.

Heinert described his goals as aggressive but necessary. "Cancer is a very aggressive disease, so we feel we have to be aggressive in our goals," Heinert said. "There are 15 million cancer survivors currently, and 1.4 million will be diagnosed this year. If we don't help those people succeed and deal with what they are going through now, then what good is it?"

4 Ways to Help River of Hope Foundation

River of Hope Foundation offers many ways for people to participate as it works to improve the lives of those affected by cancer. "We need to fund an expensive number of projects, and anyone involved with the water gardening industry knows that it's not something that can be done for free," Heinert said.

Individuals and businesses can help through: Monetary, material and labor donations or contributions. Naming River of Hope Foundation as the recipient of proceeds from a Parade of Ponds. Spreading the word to colleagues and customers.

Nominating a cancer patient.

“It’s not hard to find someone you know who has been affected by cancer,” Heinert said. “We need to know about those people, their stories and how to reach out to them.” For more information about the foundation or to nominate an individual, visit www.riverofhopefoundation.org.