

## *‘Choosing to be better – not bitter’*

Friends and volunteers raise funds for charity, share memories at Sugra golf tournament a decade after 9/11

By TAMI QUIGLEY

Staff writer

“Bill takes care of the weather,” Ed Mangold said with a smile, casting an eye to the blazing blue sky and bright sun that shone on the Bill Sugra Memorial Golf Tournament Aug. 26 at Green Pond Country Club, Bethlehem Township.

The weather mirrored the dazzling weather that was the backdrop to the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, when Sugra lost his life in the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in New York City.

Sugra, 30, was a network administrator in Cantor Fitzgerald’s eSpeed division on the 103<sup>rd</sup> floor.

The golf tournament is the lynchpin of fundraising for the Bill Sugra Memorial Fund launched by his family, parents Bill and El Sugra and sister Tracy Sell. The Sugras have been parishioners of St. Thomas More, Allentown since 1973.

The fund has raised \$300,000 in the past decade to help those in need, an apt reflection of the young man who was a victim on America’s darkest day. And the weather for the tournament has almost always been perfect.

For Mangold, it’s personal – Sugra was the best man in his wedding. But he was there at this year’s golf tournament, with so many others, playing golf, sharing memories and raising money for charity. And just like Sugra would want it, sharing some laughs along the way.

Reflecting on the golf tournament’s 10<sup>th</sup> year, Bill Sugra said it’s not so much the decade that has passed that he thinks of, but rather the volunteers who pull it all together.

“This year, we have a lot more giveaways and things than in the past, and I thank God we have all these volunteers in place,” he said. “Everything went so smoothly, we couldn’t do it without them. The golf outing has grown and we appreciate the volunteers so much.”

This year, the foundation is giving 10 grants of \$5,000 each. It also donated a green Chevrolet Express to the Central City Project of Allentown Central Catholic High School (ACCHS), Sugra’s alma mater. The van will be used for transporting students and supplies to the sites and outreaches associated with the project.

Sugra was also a graduate of St. Thomas More School. This year, the parish donated a sharp looking golf cart to Msgr. John Murphy, pastor. It was decorated that day to reflect the tournament, but afterward Msgr. Murphy could appreciate the logo of his beloved St. Louis Cardinals on the cart.

It was at ACCHS that Mangold met Sugra. “Bill was so personable, he made friends with everyone,” said Mangold, who lives with wife Jen in Reading.

“It doesn’t seem like 10 years,” Mangold said. “My memories of Bill are frozen in time. I picture him in his late 20s, forever young.”

Mangold can’t watch the documentaries about 9/11. Not that he doesn’t think people should remember, it’s just too difficult for him to watch.

Mike Sophy of Doylestown agreed. “I don’t watch television on 9/11,” said Sophy, friend and classmate of Sugra and Mangold at ACCHS.

It was through Sugra that Mangold and Sophy met Greg Bealer of New Tripoli, a Whitehall police officer who was Sugra’s roommate at Indiana University of Pennsylvania (IUP).

“When we get together as a group we talk about the good times,” Mangold said.

That was quite evident when the trio got together to play in the tournament along with Dan Schaffer of Elizabethtown, Sugra’s best friend whom he met in high school.

Bealer laughed recalling how he came home to the house he and Sugra lived in their senior year at IUP to find Sugra running between the sink and stove with pancake batter cupped in his hands. Sugra – “who was going to save his parents money and didn’t take a meal plan” – was making pancakes, but they lacked the proper utensils, most notably a ladle.

Mangold remembered how when Sugra purchased a Jeep – his first real car after landing his first real job – he called Mangold excitedly and soon pulled up to take Mangold and his wife for a ride.

“I remember just hanging out at the Sugra’s,” Sophy said. “Bill used to like to grill at night and we couldn’t see that the meat was raw.”

Their group of friends considered the Sugra’s Salisbury Township home “their home away from home” in high school and college. So much so that they’d pop in to visit Sugra’s parents even if he wasn’t there.

Schaffer found it difficult to pinpoint just one cherished memory. “It’s a collage of memories. We never had a bad time.”

He did recall going with Sugra for a late night game of hoops on Fullerton Avenue, or that it was “cool” to go bowling together at the former Boulevard Lanes in Allentown.

“We’d play pool, hang out, bust each other’s chops,” said Schaffer. “A day doesn’t go by that I don’t miss him. You won’t see anyone here who doesn’t have tender memories.”

One high school summer Sugra joined Schaffer and his family on a Florida vacation. On the golf course, the two were teasing each other about “gator warnings.” On one of the last holes by a pond they went to find lost golf balls – as they lost many – and saw a “do not cross” sign, saw something move in the water, ran to the golf cart and “floored it,” Schaffer said.

Was it a gator? They never found out, but had a great laugh over it.

Geraldine Viola of Allentown, acting as photographer at the tournament, went to high school and college with Sugra.

“One of my fondest memories is going to the senior prom with him,” Viola said. She said the two shared lots of great laughs, even just getting caught in the rain walking to class.

“I feel like I still hear his laugh and saying my name on the phone.”

So many at the tournament knew and had great affection for Sugra; others did not know him personally, but were enthusiastic to participate in such a worthy cause.

“It’s bittersweet. I can’t believe 10 years have passed,” said Sell, who laments her brother never got to meet her two children with husband Steve: Tripp, 6 months, and Reagan, 22 months.

“It’s inspiring to my parents and I that the volunteers have put this on for 10 years. It’s great to honor my brother’s memory in a positive way,” said Sell. “From something tragic came something very positive. We look forward to it every year.”

Sell explained the fund began when St. Thomas More students, hoping Sugra would be found alive, raised \$75,000 to assist with his medical expenses.

One of the people who have been there for the Sugras through everything is Msgr. Murphy, who also serves on the Bill Sugra Memorial Fund committee. Msgr. Murphy knew Sugra since he was a fourth-grader at the parish school.

“At the time of Sept. 11, we learned Billy was on the top floor and probably was killed – we didn’t know yet for sure – you go through a lot of emotions,” said Msgr. Murphy.

“Are you going to be bitter or better? I’m really very proud of the response of the Sugra family and their friends for choosing to be better.”

The Bill Sugra Memorial Fund – for which the golf tournament is the largest fundraiser – is “a fitting response to the quality of his life; a life lived honestly and decently, reaching out to people, feeding the hungry, letting people realize they are not abandoned,” said Msgr. Murphy.

“It’s the finest monument to be able to continue Billy’s quality of life. The Sugras have embarked on a path that makes us all better.”

Several priests also got in the “swing of things” on the course, including Father Allen Hoffa, ACCHS chaplain and resident of St. Thomas More; and Father Keith Mathur, assistant pastor of St. Thomas More.

“Bill and El are phenomenal people,” Father Hoffa said. “The tournament is a beautiful tribute after such a tragic loss. Putting the memorial fund committee together has done so much to help so many through the memorial fund.”

“It’s a great honor to play in such a tournament, it’s a great memorial to Bill and his family,” Father Mathur said.

Also taking to the greens that day was Father Daniel Gambet, an Oblate of St. Francis de Sales and president emeritus of DeSales University, Center Valley, who has been involved with the memorial fund.

The tournament began with kids from Embrace Your Dreams and The First Tee of the Lehigh Valley at the Boys and Girl’s Club of Easton and Willowbrook Golf Course receiving tips from golf instructors before the children teed off at 8 a.m.

Embrace Your Dreams, through “First Tee of Willowbrook” and “First Tee of Lehigh Valley,” provides golf instruction and teaches life skills. At lunchtime, the children received a certificate and a gift bag, along with a hug from El Sugra.

“You’re a very important part of our tournament,” Bill Sugra told the youngsters. “Golf teaches you a lot of things about character.”

Bruce, 17, valued the experience. “We had a good game, it was nice. My chipping is better. We learned teamwork out there.”

At noon, prior to the shotgun start for golfers, the Naval Color Guard presented the flag and the Gilbert family sang the National Anthem. The Gilbert family, also parishioners of St. Thomas More, are five siblings who have been performing together for more than seven years, ages 13 to 20.

Troy Hein of WFMZ-TV Channel 69 presented Sell with a mounted and framed American flag that flew in Afghanistan on behalf of Chief Master Sgt. Michael Schmidt;

Carl Schmidt, retired Air Force; Mike and Mick Sugra and Jim Nenschel. Sell voiced gratitude on behalf of the Sugra family. Hein played in the tournament and did two live remote broadcasts from the event.

The event concluded with a reception/silent auction and dinner at 5 p.m., with entertainment provided by the jazz ensemble from the Community Music School.

Scott Chevrolet, Allentown and Plumbers Union Local Number 690 were major sponsors for this year's tournament. Other sponsors include actors Ben Stiller and his wife Christine Taylor, who is an ACCHS graduate.

Past grant recipients include Embrace Your Dreams; Boy's and Girl's Club of Allentown; Lehigh County Conference of Churches; Sacred Heart Hospital, Allentown; Catholic Charities, Diocese of Allentown; Mercy Special Learning Center, Allentown; Camelot for Children, Allentown; the Eastern Pennsylvania Down Syndrome Center; Greater Lehigh Valley Muscular Dystrophy Association; William Allen Chorale of Allen High School; Allentown Ecumenical Food Bank; Meals on Wheels of Lehigh County, Inc.; and Meals on Wheels of Northampton County.

For more information, visit website [www.billsugramemorialfund.org](http://www.billsugramemorialfund.org).