

By Michele Morgan Bolton | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT NOVEMBER 29, 2012



TIM MORELLI

Notre Dame in Paris,, shadows in Hoboken, N.J., and a tree at the New York Botanical Garden.

Tears are never far from Jerry Morelli's eyes when he talks about his son Tim.

"He had a way of understanding people," the former Holbrook resident said of his son. "If they were feeling bad, he cheered them up. If they were happy, he took pleasure in their happiness."

Tim Morelli, the youngest of five children, died at age 27 on Halloween in 2007 after a brief fight with a rare form of lymphoma that ambushed him at the height of his medical and artistic career.

As a last request, the Xaverian Brothers High School and Fordham University graduate — who was a nurse in the transplant unit at the New York University Medical Center — asked his family to use his thousands of black-and-white photographs to help others.

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True to his wishes, the family has shared images from Tim’s portfolio for an exhibit running through March in the art gallery at South Shore Dermatology Physicians in North Easton. Proceeds from any sales of the photographs will be donated to the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute in Boston, where Tim was treated for his cancer.

The exhibit contains just a small fraction of the photos the young artist captured on film in his travels in France, Italy, the American southwest, and in the everyday rhythms of life in New York, New Jersey, and with his loved ones in Massachusetts.

“He left us so much,” Jerry Morelli said, indicating the dozens of sharp black-and-white photos — and one in color — that hang artfully in the window-filled waiting room. “He wanted us to be happy, not sad. You see this beauty, and how he saw things, and it’s like he said, ‘This is my gift to you.’ ”

Marianne Morelli, Tim’s mother, smiles at the thought of such a legacy.

“That is so very precious,” she said. “But then again, he always thought differently.”

Creating an art gallery inside a medical office is unusual, said Dr. Viraj Shroff-Mehta, a partner in the practice, but it serves several purposes.

“Everyone is moved by art in some way, shape, or form,” Shroff-Mehta said. “And artists are strapped now to get galleries to take their work on.”

When they chose to open the gallery in 2008, she said, doctors at South Shore Dermatology felt strongly they could provide a space for local artists to share their gifts.

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They also hoped the revolving exhibits would provide a calming environment for patients who may be nervous about meeting with a specialist.

Tim Morelli's work was referred to the partners by their nurse, Maria McKinnies, whose son Robert was his friend.

He also left books of poetry and other writings that his father sees as an unexpected and welcome window into a part of his son he never knew.

"You don't realize as they grow up the depths of what they are feeling," his father, a former dean of students at Boston College High School, said as he was surrounded by the exhibit.

Taking a deep breath to compose himself, Morelli continued, "Then to see it, well . . ."

Since their son's death, the Morellis, who now live on Martha's Vineyard, have created a website, www.timmorelli.com, and posted samples of Tim's work.

The site also serves as a home base for The Positivity Squadron, a close group of family and friends that Tim drew on for strength as he battled his illness, and who now draw that from his memory.

Over the course of his eight-month fight, Tim sent out about 16 e-mails that were often updates on his condition, but served the higher purpose of sharing his insights into the world around him.

"He said, 'I don't want to hear the odds, that's not how I want to deal with this,' " said his sister Celia Gillis of Martha's Vineyard, who was with her brother when he received the grim diagnosis.

"So, instead, he turned it around and sent an e-mail to everyone he knew and said, 'I'll



JONATHAN WIGGS/GLOBE STAFF

Jerry and Marianne Morelli with an exhibit of photos by their late son, Tim.

soak up all you have for me and be positive,’ ” she said. “And there was never a mention of it again.”

On April 10, 2007, for example, after learning Celia and older brother Jerry were matches for a stem cell transplant, Tim was euphoric in an e-mail blast that went to his squadron, including his other brothers, George and Steve.

“I cannot say enough how much I know your thoughts, support, and prayers have and will continue to help me through this,” he wrote. “Thank You All, from the core of the sun, I am deeply grateful.”

And still, he couldn’t resist a joke after having sent a prior note riddled with mistakes: “I do have to apologize to Ms. Leventhal (my seventh-grade English teacher) and to anyone who read it. It was like a typo party, and everyone showed up.”

In his last e-mail, as he weakened after the cancer returned, Tim was already reaching out with solace for the loved ones he was leaving behind.

“It’s OK to feel sad, scared, angry, depressed. These are all normal and the way I like to look at those emotions are as passing clouds, passing over a blue sky of hope and happiness,” he wrote. “And no matter what the inclement weather brings, there will always and forever be the underlying sky that brings sun.”

Before he died, Tim asked his parents to send his undeveloped film to MV Photo Labs in New York, which has handled work for such artists as Annie Leibovitz, James Nachtwey, and Gordon Parks.

Lab owner and master printer James Megargee recognized the quality of Tim’s work and agreed to print about 500 of the photographs at cost. He also hosted a show of Tim’s work after his death.

“In this varied body of work we see tender young eyes discover the medium,” Megargee wrote in a description of the show at the time. He also lauded Tim for recognizing “the decisive moment” when all elements fall together for a complete visual statement.

Marianne Morelli said she will be glad if photos sell and proceeds can benefit a good cause such as Dana-Farber, but the purpose of the exhibit is just for people to see the work, as her son asked.

“Tim just really wanted people to enjoy his pictures,” she said. “He was very proud of them and he gave them to people who were special.”

South Shore Dermatology is at 31 Roche Bros. Way in North Easton. The exhibit can be viewed Monday through Friday 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., excluding lunch hours and holidays. Questions about the display and prices should be sent to Marianne Morelli at mnmorelli@gmail.com.

Michele Morgan Bolton can be reached at michelebolton@live.com.