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Students remember classmate by keeping tradition alive

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The tree stands about 9 feet tall, but it stands for a class's devotion to the memory of a lost classmate.

On Dec. 2, 2001, Julie Oehrle, a third grader at St. Joseph Elementary in Cold Spring passed away after a five year struggle with a Wilms tumor, a rare type of kidney cancer.

The following spring the school planted an evergreen dedicated to Julia's memory. A year later, her class - then fourth graders - trimmed the tree with Christmas decorations. It was a practice they continued every year after that. This year, with Julia's class having moved on to high school, St. Joseph's staff didn't expect the tree to be decorated. But when they returned from Thanksgiving break, it was.

"We've been decorating the tree every Christmas since fourth grade," said Maggi Donnermeyer, a freshman at Brossart High School. "My class just left last year. I didn't think the school would do anything since we weren't there, so I kind of took charge and I got a bunch of my friends to help."

Donnermeyer and her friends decorated the tree with an ornament for each student in the third grade at St. Joseph with Julia. Each of the 67 ornaments has the student's name written on it.

"I selected the ornaments according to their high school colors," said Donnermeyer. "Brossart - silver ornament with green writing; NCC - gold with royal blue writing."

"Purple was Julia's favorite color. She has a big purple ornament with her name written in white."

The class's third grade teacher was moved by the continued tradition.

"It's a testament to these kids who came back this year, " said Theresa Kaufman, who still puts up Julia's 8 x 10 third grade photo. "This tree is not right out in front of their school anymore. They thought it was very important to keep this memory going and I think that took a lot of effort on their part to make sure it happened."

"When she passed away, this group of kids - there was something different about them. They stayed together."

Julia's father, Stuart Oehrle, a research chemist at NKU and Cold Spring councilman, was pleased by the class honoring his daughter's memory.

"My wife and I were very touched," he said. "We were surprised by what they did. I drop my son off at Cline and drive to NKU and I stopped by to see the tree. They did a real nice job."

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