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Memorial concert for a boy taken too soon

By Cheryl Allison

Riders on November's First Friday Main Line trolley were captivated by the young boy, one of several students from Haverford's Nelly Berman School of Music performing on the bus that night, who could play some serious violin, then surprise them with a heart-melting grin. No one could have imagined then that in less than three weeks that same boy would be gravely ill, or, even more inconceivably, succumb to a devastating disease.

But that is what happened. Chanlan Lee of Villanova, who had become the music school's youngest scholarship student when he started studying there at age 5½, was hospitalized on his eighth birthday Nov. 26 with what doctors would diagnose as viral encephalitis. By the next day he was in a coma. He died Dec. 19.

But the music Chanlan loved so much will be his legacy. Students, faculty and families at the school are coming together to hold a memorial concert. It will take place Friday, Jan. 23, at 7 p.m. in Centennial Hall at The Haverford School, 450 Lancaster Ave.

Donations at the event will go to establish a Chanlan Lee Memorial Scholarship at the Nelly Berman School. Elena Berman, a teacher at the school and daughter of its founder, said it was Chanlan's family's wish.

"She wants for his name not to disappear," Berman said, and for other talented young musicians to have the opportunity Chanlan had to study there.

"Hopefully, his eight short years will continue" in a way, his mother, Catherine Chan, said.

With his mother, father Lap Kei Lee, and baby brother Chan Dric, now 4, Chanlan had moved to Villanova three years ago. It wasn't long after that that he began studying violin "just for basic interest," according to Catherine. But his first teacher soon told her he was so talented he should pursue more serious studies.

His parents brought him to the Berman school, which is unusual, Elena Berman said, in awarding scholarships based solely on talent. Chanlan was selected for the program.

It's demanding, Berman said. Students in the school's gifted program are required to take two one-hour lessons each week and practice at least two hours per day.

Chanlan threw himself into the lessons, and he could be determined, she said. When he was 6, he studied piano with her. "I'm a very serious piano teacher," she said, but she recommended he give up those lessons to devote more time to violin. "He refused," she said, and told her, "If you don't want to teach me, I'll go to another teacher. He loved music. He breathed music."

But his mother said Chanlan was well-rounded in his interests. A talented student at Gladwyne Elementary School, he was learning algebra with her as a second-grader. "He was a good artist. He loved to knit. He loved to read," she said.

Even more striking, though, she and Berman both said, was his compassion and empathy. After Chanlan started at the school, he "loved performing at fund-raisers because he was doing something to help people," his mother said. After the earthquake in China last year, "he wanted to go out on the street and perform to raise money."

Elena Berman recalls that, after her mother talked to students once, encouraging them to study and do their best because scholarship funds were limited, Chanlan began playing for diners at a family restaurant. He saved up his "tips," and one day came to school "with a piggy bank filled with \$312."

In late November Chanlan had been "running a fever off and on for a few days," his mother said. When she took him to the doctor, he tested positive for strep throat and was prescribed antibiotics. But he seemed so tired that on the morning

of Nov. 26 his family took him to Bryn Mawr Hospital. There, his condition worsened "hour by hour," until at 5:30 p.m. he was transported to Children's Hospital of Philadelphia. "It was his birthday, but he never got to blow out his candles," Chan said.

Viral encephalitis is a rare disease that causes inflammation of the spinal cord and brain. In Chanlan's case, his mother said, doctors tried surgery, but eventually told the family that his brain had been so damaged that he could not survive.

When members of the Berman school community learned that he had died, and that the family wanted to remember him with a concert, Elena Berman said many wanted to participate. At first, the school planned to hold the event at St. Luke's Church in Bryn Mawr, where it has been holding First Friday performances for a few months. But it quickly became apparent that it needed a bigger hall. The Haverford School is providing its auditorium.

Several of Berman's students wanted to perform. In addition to groups of students, participating in the benefit will be Daniel Song, a piano student from Radnor, who has performed on National Public Radio's "From the Top" and recently appeared in public television's "Live from Carnegie Hall" documentary on talented young musicians.

Rebecca Kenney, 17, an international prize-winning pianist, will also perform, as will Katherine Hung, 9, and Ethan Lee, 10, who will perform a four-handed duet.

A highlight of the concert, however, will be an appearance by husband-and-wife team Maxim and Svetlana Mogilevsky. By coincidence, Maxim, who is the grandson of a musician who taught her mother and who was her own first piano teacher in Odessa, Russia had recently contacted Nelly, Elena said. Recently signed by Columbia Artists Management, they reside now in the United States.

When they heard about Chanlan's concert, they offered to perform, Elena said. They will be performing a four-handed duet titled, appropriately enough, "Little Husband, Little Wife."

The concert is open to all in the community. Donations for the Chanlan Lee Memorial Scholarship will be accepted at the door.

Donations may also be sent to the Nelly Berman School of Music, 461 W. Lancaster Ave., Haverford, PA 19041. For more information, call Kristin Gray, 610-896-5105.

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