



Caleb Vandenberg/Freeman Staff Dee Dee and Bob Werner pose near the backyard garden established in memory of their daughter. Becky Werner died from meningitis in 2004 at age 20.

Mukwonago woman spreads the word about potentially life-saving vaccine

Werners lost 20-year-old daughter to meningitis

By MELISSA RIGNEY BAXTER
Special to The Freeman

MUKWONAGO – Dee Dee Werner is a woman with a mission – to let other parents know about the dangers of meningitis and the availability of a vaccine. Two and a half years ago, Werner and her husband, Bob, experienced firsthand the devastating impact the disease can have when their daughter, Becky, died of the disease on Feb. 25, 2004.

“I can’t believe this happened to us, but it did,” Dee Dee Werner said. “What else am I going to do? I can hear Becky saying ‘Mom, you’ve got to do something.’”

The Werners, who live in Mukwonago, formed Becky Werner Foundation Inc. to spread the word about preventing the disease. This month, the foundation was welcomed into The Confederation of Meningitis Organizations, a global nonprofit group that includes 14 meningitis and children’s organizations from around the world.

“There are only four organizations in the United States that belong to (COMO),” said Werner, 51, who traveled to New York City for a meeting with the organization this month. “It was an incredible experience.”

Becky Werner was 20 years old and a student at Waukesha County Technical College. On Feb. 24, 2004, she stayed home from school because she wasn't feeling well. That evening, her parents rushed her to the hospital, and by the next day, she had died.

Werner said there is a misconception that meningitis is linked to dorm living, but that is not the case. The group at highest risk for the disease is 18- to 24-year-olds.

"It has nothing to do with living in the dorms," she said. "That's the biggest fallacy people have."

College-age students are at risk partly because of habits that make them more susceptible, such as staying up late, exposure to secondhand smoke and not getting the right nutrition.

Werner said the vaccine, while not 100 percent effective, is the best preventive tool, along with not sharing drinks or food with others. Werner said she sees a big risk among sports teams, especially, as teammates might share sports water bottles or sodas.

The Werners worked with Aurora Healthcare's Visiting Nurse Association to develop a program to share their message. They speak at high schools, to the media, at craft shows and wherever they can find people and groups ready to listen.

"The vaccination is not required but it's recommended," said Werner, who has worked in the medical field for 25 years. "It's available for people from age 11 to 55."

The couple has their faith and their friends to lean on but Werner said at times it seems to get more difficult to deal with her daughter's death.

"I don't know how anybody gets through this without faith," Werner said. "I'm going to see her again. I'm banking on that."

There's a garden planted in Becky's memory in the Werners' back yard, and countless teens who have been vaccinated because of the Werners' message.

"A lady e-mailed me and said, 'Every time a child is vaccinated, Becky lives on,'" Werner said.