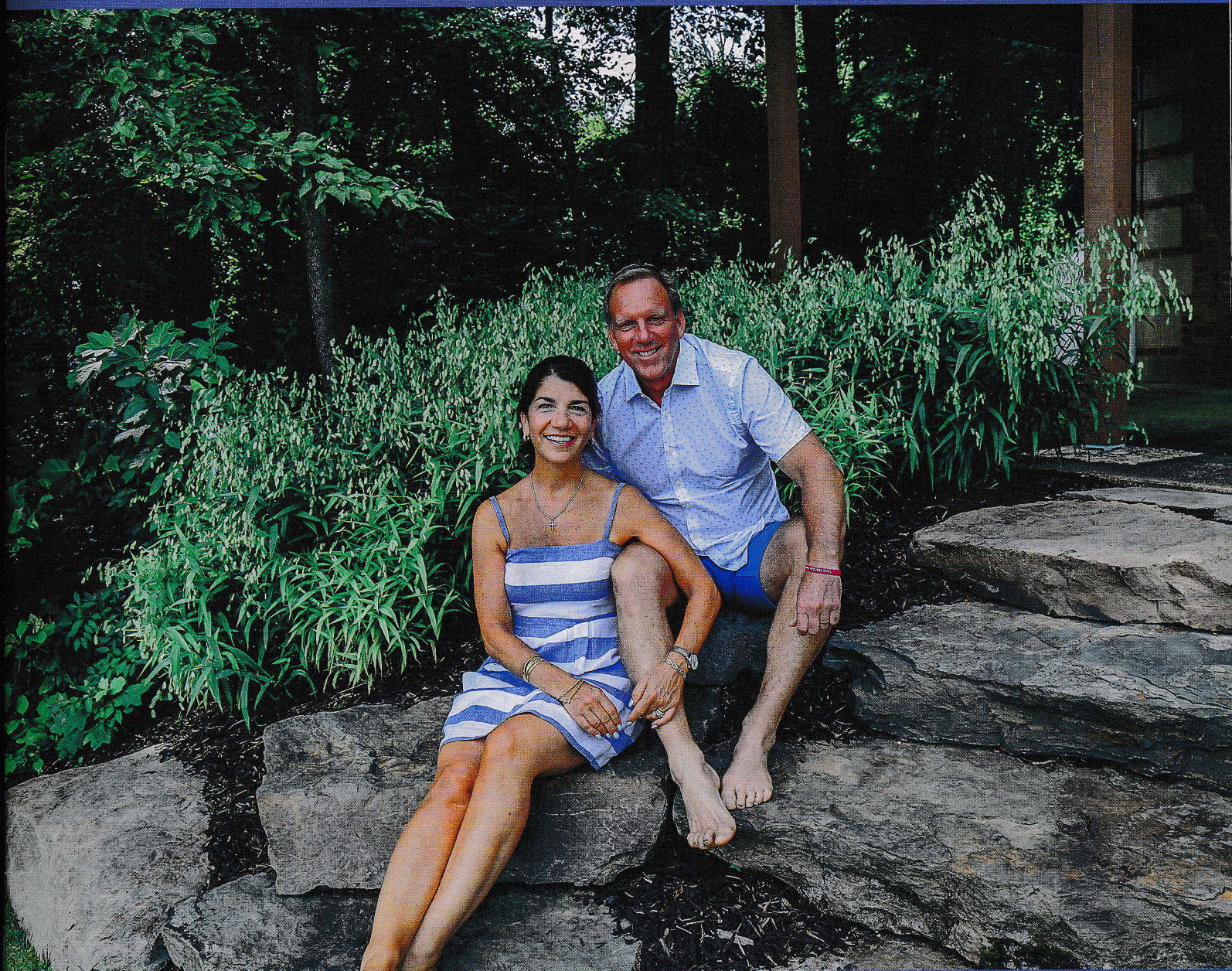


East Bradford NEIGHBORS



Bridging Two Communities

Cover Photo by Aubrey Sloan

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Andrew's Legacy

By Candice Monhollan-Henry | Photos by Aubrey Sloan

Hicks Family Turn Tragedy into an Inspirational Foundation



West Chester residents Karen and Andy Hicks were celebrating their 20-year wedding anniversary in 2010 and thought what better way to do it than with a big family vacation to California with their four children. The plan was to start in San Francisco and work their way down the beautiful and picturesque Coastal Highway to Los Angeles.

On July 19, the third day of this once-in-a-lifetime trip, the Hicks family was hiking the Coastal Trail at Muir Beach, a path climbing up the mountains in the Golden Gate National Recreation Area and which overlooks the Pacific Ocean. Their two sons, Andrew and Kyle, had gone off only about 100 feet ahead and just out of view of Karen and Andy.

Taking an off-shoot from the main trail toward a bluff, the brothers wanted to get a better look at some rocks jutting out of waves when the unthinkable happened. Seventeen-year-old Andrew, who got down on all fours to safely check out the view, lost his footing on a loose rock, slipped, and slid down the cliff.

"Kyle came running back to tell us what had happened," Karen said. "Andy immediately hiked down and found his son's body at the edge of the shore, attempted to resuscitate him, but realized he had already lost his earthly life."

Finding His Mission

Andrew was born on Feb. 26, 1993, and was the first child of Karen and Andy, followed soon by sisters Kelly and Amelia and brother Kyle. As described by his parents, he was laid back and easy going, never one prone to drama and always level-headed. He was never one to take things too seriously.

However, one thing he did take seriously was his Christian faith.

Even as a teenager, Andrew had a hope that, because of knowing him, one student at his high school of West Chester Henderson would come to know Jesus.

Andrew had such a deep faith that he even once made an almost prophetic statement two months before his passing, telling his mother that "I just want you to know, mom, that if anyone asks me if I was a follower of Christ or not, even to save my life, I would never deny who Jesus was."

"I just thought, 'Who says that when they're 17?'" Karen said. "I just made a mental note of it and didn't really think anything of it. We've studied the Bible since they were babies and I remember Andrew saying that he just couldn't wait to get to heaven. He said, 'I just want to finish high school first,' and we laughed at that and didn't

think much of it."

He spent a few summers in the city of Chester with his youth group at Christ Community Church in West Chester, even living in the basement of the Frederick Douglass Christian School. It was during this time that he realized his passion for helping the children of Chester have the same opportunities that he and his friends and schoolmates had in West Chester.

"He would stay in contact with the kids he met in Chester during the schoolyear," Karen said. "He always had this strong appreciation for West Chester and a great gratitude for where he lived, but then, while he was in middle school and high school, he became passionate over why things aren't equal everywhere. He was very aware of the difference and it bothered him."

Building a Foundation

Before they even returned home from California following the tragedy, Andy knew in his heart that the family had to keep Andrew's legacy going, especially in his pursuit of wanting to make a difference in his and other nearby communities.

Karen and Andy met with a lawyer immediately and by August, the Andrew L. Hicks, Jr. Foundation was

established with the mission to "share the love of Christ by connecting two culturally diverse communities, empowering their youth through mentorship and leadership, and building dynamic futures."

"We flew back from California a few days later and then got the Foundation started that week," Karen said. "Even just as his funeral was ending, we were already talking to an attorney and started working on a logo. We knew we were going to do something, but we just didn't know what it would be."

Warrior Guides

Surprisingly, it was the Henderson high school students who got the ball rolling for the Foundation.

"They came up with ideas on what they wanted to do," Karen said. "They wanted to do a school supply drive, so we did that the following week, and then they wanted to do a carnival, so we did that in October in Chester."

More than 100 of the high school students came out to volunteer at the carnival. Following the event, Karen met with the school counselors from Chester and asked what the Foundation could do to help the schools and the district.



"They asked if we could create fun activities for the students to do that would be safe and allow them to just be kids," she said. "That's what we did. Every single month, we would take the children of Chester bowling, or take them to a St. Joe's basketball game, or roller skating. Every month, we did a fun activity and there was no obligation for the children. They just had to sign up and we provided all the transportation, the venue, meals, and vetted chaperones."

Students at Henderson were also welcome to attend these events with no obligation to allow them to bond with the younger kids.

By the summer of the following year, the Foundation held its first camp where 88 children from Chester and 45 high school kids camped together at Paradise Farm Camps.

"We realized at this point that the kids really enjoyed each other," Karen said. "All we had to do was create the event and they made the party."

It was at this point that Warrior Guides was born within the Foundation, which has 100 Henderson students match with 100 Chester students in fourth, fifth, or sixth grade each year and they stay together until the Henderson student graduates or the Chester student reaches high school.

"You can imagine how much they become good friends and even their parents become friends," Karen said. "The families will sometimes visit with each other outside of the Warrior Guides events."

Making a Difference

Over the last 12 years, the Foundation has continued to grow with more programs added, including RISE, a teen leadership development program for Chester students in seventh through ninth grade; Launch, a program

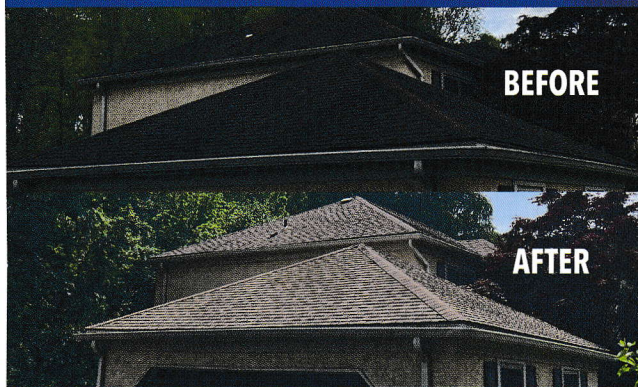


for Chester students in 10th through 12th grade that empowers the students to get into college or trade school and future employment; and Brave Conversations, a program for adults in both Chester and West Chester to have an open and honest discussion with each other to better understand racial issues, different cultures, and different life experiences.

The Hicks family is grateful and amazed at how successful the Foundation has become in its mission, but they continue to have to take things day-by-day as the pain of Andrew's loss never really seems to lessen.

"We just went on vacation together and did some hiking, and there are still tons of tears and a lot of hurt and bad memories," Karen said. "The pain is there for us all the time. My children are not who they otherwise would be if they hadn't lost their brother, and the same goes for my

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husband and I, but our faith has gotten stronger and my husband and I can lean on each other and our marriage is really strong."

But it's through that strength that the family is able to take such a horrific tragedy and be able to build something so inspirational that makes such a difference in the community around them.

"He tried to do his best to make a difference where he could, and that's what I see here with the Foundation," she said. "A lot of kids really want to make a difference and these high school kids are volunteering – it's where their heart is. The Foundation says that if you want to make a difference, we'll make it as easy for you as possible. Even the kids who have gone through the program are giving back now, which includes 19 Chester students coming to camp as counselors.

"I can feel Andrew's heart for these kids," she said. "When I see all of us together at an event with so much laughter and so much fun, I know this is what he had pictured and this is what he had wanted."

As Andrew would also want everyone to remember, and what was one of his favorite quotes, "Life is short. Love the one you got."

For more information about or to get involved with the Andrew L. Hicks, Jr. Foundation, visit www.andrewhicksjrfoundation.org or call (866) 254-5710.

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