

Elizabeth Podsiadlo, athlete, inspiration for Grand Island baseball field

Young teen inspired building of ball field

By [Michelle Kearns](#) | News Staff Reporter

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Elizabeth Podsiadlo was just about to start eighth grade after a summer of playing baseball at the Grand Island field she helped design for people like herself.

The 13-year-old girl, who everyone called “Ellie,” delighted in teasing her father about his love for the Mets and in the special rubberized field she inspired. She was 13, born with spina bifida and paralyzed from the chest down.

Yet she grew up so keen on watching her younger brother’s baseball games – in spite of the bumpy ride across the grass – that her aunt Teresa Hooper began to look into building a field that would be easy for wheelchairs to cross.

Elizabeth’s unexpected death Sunday led Hooper to remember the wide smile that followed the first time her niece hit a ball and rounded the bases in her wheelchair after the \$1.5 million Miracle League complex opened at Veteran’s Park in 2011, less than a year after fundraising began.

“It was meant to be,” Hooper said. “Honestly, every aspect of the field, she had something to do with.”

In the beginning, Elizabeth did not like how the complex’s construction absorbed her family’s time and attention. But before long, she was pitching in.

She mixed concrete, raked stone and helped figure out a plan for the bathroom, so it had a platform strong enough to hold someone changing clothes.

Ramps around the complex, which includes a snack bar and playground, were sized to her wheelchair. She picked out a glider swing called a "Fun Sway," with places for both wheelchairs and standing kids.

"She was mad at first," said Hooper. "She realized it was good. Her friends started showing up. The boys started showing up. She liked to be there."

The project was modeled on designs from a Georgia-based Miracle League nonprofit, which counts 250 such rubberized fields in the United States, Canada, Australia and Mexico.

Local leagues usually attract 200 to 300 players. In Grand Island, six teams, with 15 kids each, play three times a week with help from a buddy.

Elizabeth was also an ice skater, participating in the Gliding Stars program. She looked forward to the annual "Sabres Day" baseball games with current and former players volunteering as Miracle Field buddies.

For a long time, she favored Rene Robert, a former Grand Island resident and family friend. Lately, she made friends with Nathan Gerbe.

"It would be the struggle as to who would be her buddy," said Hooper.

Elizabeth, a student at Grand Island Middle School, was known for her wit. "She had a smart comment for everybody," said Hooper. "She loved saying, 'Whatever!'"

She liked teasing her father when they sat down to watch the Mets together. "It's time for torture," she would tell him.

"Because," said Hooper, "the Mets never won."

Her family couldn't help but think that she had something to do with the Mets beating the Los Angeles Dodgers on Sunday, the day she died.

"Since she's gone," said Hooper, "we're getting little signs that she's around."

Elizabeth is survived by her mother and father, Gale and Tom Podsiadlo; her brother, T.J.; and grandparents Joanne Podsiadlo and Gale and Dick Sander.

A Mass of Christian Burial will be offered at 10 a.m. today in St. Stephen Catholic Church, 2100 Baseline Road, Grand Island.