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A Dream Come True
By Jennifer Amy Myers, Sun Staff

Birthday Wishes Seldom Come True.

You fill your lungs with air, and release it with the force of a dozen untied balloons, extinguishing the candles in one try. A wish is made. You cross your fingers and maybe your toes. You can't tell anyone, or it won't come true.

On May 10, Phyllis Gimbel told everyone about her 60th birthday wish. On Nov. 22, it came true.

That afternoon, dozens of residents, staff and family members gathered in the courtyard of the Lowell Health Care Center, a neuro-rehabilitative facility on Christian Hill, to dedicate the spacious new gazebo, which was decorated with lights and balloons for its big debut.

Last June, Gimbel met with Lowell Health Care Center Executive Director Mark O'Flaherty. She was itching to do something for the dedicated staff that care so completely for her sister Cindy Baybick, a resident of the center.

Baybick, 50, suffers from Huntington's Disease, a rare inherited progressive neurological disorder causing degeneration of nerve cells in the brain. She must use a wheelchair and can no longer speak.

Tests of both Gimbel and Betsy Ratner, Baybick's other sister, for the genetic disorder have come back negative.

"I have learned a lot about how to read people who cannot speak by focusing on their eyes and facial expressions," Gimbel said.

"The staff here really care about each individual and cater to them at his or her own level," she added. "I wanted to do something to recognize that care and concern."

The question was how should she give back? A scholarship? A staff party? New equipment for the facility?

"I told her that I knew the staff would love to give back to the residents," said O'Flaherty. "We would love a gazebo, but lack the luxury of extra money."

And so the quest to build a gazebo for the 282 employees and 160 residents of the center -- 52 of whom suffer from Huntington's Disease -- began.

John Chemaly of Trinity Ambulance forked over his coveted Red Sox tickets. The raffle raised \$1,000.

"They were really good seats," he laughed, shaking his head.

The UMass Lowell Physical Therapy Club raised \$400 through a wheelchair-basketball-a-thon.

United We Stand for Jason, a nonprofit foundation established in the name of Jason Hilton, also a resident at Lowell Health Care Center, jumped in to help raise money and act as the clearinghouse for all donations.

As the starting center of the Merrimack, N.H. High School football team, Hilton helped to lead his team to the state football championship in 1987. He made the last tackle of the game.

At the age of 36, Hilton was tackled by Huntington's Disease, which had taken the lives of both his father and grandmother.

The foundation was formed by Dan Gilmore and Dan O'Neil, two of Hilton's teammates on that high-school team.

At the dedication ceremony, Hilton sat in his wheelchair, cradling a football on his lap. He smiled as he gathered the strength and coordination to lift the ball high enough to toss it to a staff member.

And instead of throwing her a big party for her 60th birthday, Gimbel's family respected her wishes and donated money to make the gazebo a reality.

Less than six months after the idea took shape, \$6,000 had been raised and the gazebo sits in the courtyard.

"This gazebo will serve as a sanctuary for all who live and work here," Gimbel said.

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