

Friends, family remember ex-Chaparral baseball player Michael Lio with fundraiser

by **Richard Obert** - Jul. 23, 2010 The Arizona Republic

It was Michael Lio's kind of turnout Saturday night. Friends filled the spacious kitchen and front room of his parents' ranch-style home in northeast Phoenix. More friends were upstairs playing pool in the game room. His girlfriend, Samantha Cerny, greeted guests at the door.

Michael Lio wasn't there, but the former Chaparral High second baseman's spirit was.

Guests bought Michael's Angels Strike Out Sarcoma T-shirts, black wristbands and other items in a fundraiser to fight the battle against Ewing's sarcoma that took Lio's life at age 22. It is a rare cancer that attacks the soft tissues and bones and claimed Lio on Oct. 29.

His mother, Melanie Lio, said the goal was to raise \$22,000 between that and Monday night's Diamondbacks-New York Mets game at Chase Field for the initial Strike Out Sarcoma Night. Funds go to Ewing's sarcoma research as part of the FJC/Liddy Shriver Sarcoma Initiative in memory of Michael Lio.

It was appropriate it came with the Mets in town. Mets rookie first baseman Ike Davis grew up playing sports, particularly baseball, with Lio. After Fall League games, he came to the hospital and spent the night during Lio's last day. Shortly after Davis was called up by Triple-A Buffalo early this season, Davis got behind an "I Like Ike" T-shirt promotion with proceeds going to Ewing's sarcoma research.

That last October night, the hospice room was overflowing with past Chaparral teammates, including Davis.

"Everybody loved him," said Toni Dietz, whose son Spencer was one of Michael's closest friends growing up.

Lio was the scrappy kid who pulled everybody together for get-togethers at his home. He was the one making the calls to arrange a baseball game. He played the sport year-round. He was part of a national championship club team with Davis. As a sophomore, Lio's hit triggered the 12th-inning run in 2002 that beat Coronado for the first of the school's four consecutive state baseball championships.

"He was always going to be on top of the world, just like we were all back then," former Chaparral teammate Mike McDonald said. "He was one of the most fun-loving kids in our group. He was probably the biggest prankster, playing jokes, just having fun all of the time."

Tim Sherlock, who went on to play at Duke after graduating from Chaparral in 2005, was stunned to hear the news of his friend suffering from cancer last year.

"It's scary how something like that can happen," Sherlock said. "He was always a happy, cheerful guy."

After complaining about persistent pain in his neck behind his skull, Lio had an X-ray performed by a chiropractor. That's when the cancer was spotted. He traveled out of state to see a specialist. He had surgery, and the family never lost hope.

"Actually, he handled it better than all of us," Mario Lio, Michael's father, said. "He was unbelievably sane about the whole thing. He never said, 'Why me?' "

Getting behind the initiative has been therapeutic for the Lio family. Pictures and plaques from Michael's baseball days fill the game room. There is a framed photo of the 2002, 12-inning state championship score card. There are championship celebration pictures from three seasons.

When the cancer spread to his liver, all they could do was bring Lio back to Phoenix and keep him comfortable in the final days of his 14-month battle.

"He never stopped, always going, 'Just throw me one more, dad, one more,' " Mario said. "He was a fierce competitor. He was a lucky kid. He was never sick in his life. And just like that. . . ."