

## Memory of young girl lives on in friendship and family

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Once upon a time there was a lonely flower sitting in the meadow. It rained and poured. The next day, she had a friend.

Those words were written by Maria Fudge when she was four years old. Maria valued her friends above all else, and seven years later, a flower still sits in the rain, accompanying those same words that now mark her tombstone.

Maria died of a stroke last year on April 6, two months after her tenth birthday.

On Friday, Feb. 5, the students and staff at her former school in North York, St. Jude Catholic School, held a celebration of her life by holding a concert in her honour.

"Friendship meant everything to Maria and I think she defined that as a key component to life and happiness," said Joe Fudge, Maria's father. "Today what she would be thinking is, 'Wow, everybody is acting like friends today.' Everybody was acting in the spirit of friendship and that was ultimately important to her."

Students gathered in the auditorium at 9:30 a.m. to listen to musical performances from local bands, faculty members, former students and internationally acclaimed flamenco guitarist Jorge Vega. The Friendship Fund, raised by Maria's family, paid for the sound and lighting equipment that made the morning full of energy and excitement.

The Celebration of Life was billed as a day of positivity and thanks. Most of the students were clapping their hands and squirming out of their carefully arranged cross-legged rows, but it was distinctly bittersweet for those who knew Maria best.

Things haven't been the same for her classmates, who are now in Grade 5. Maria was best friends with Alicia Baron, who said she hasn't seen as many smiles in her classroom without Maria there.

"She was my best friend and I just got really upset about it because I miss her so much," said Alicia before she paused to hold back a sob. "She would be really happy today, though, because she knows that everyone loves her and thinks she is a great friend."

Classmate Austin Gutta Sampaio followed her commentary with a reminder: "We aren't celebrating that she passed away, but that she has never left our hearts."

Coming back to St. Jude was a difficult experience for her father, but Joe knew his daughter had a passion for music and wanted to see the students sharing in something Maria loved.

"Her death brought about a real sense of community, not only within the school," said Joe. "It's redefined my sense of community because I've received so much love and support from the school and community. What I find Maria has done in her own way, through her death, is reactivate the community in a spiritual way."

He commended the staff at St. Jude for being able to maintain a positive outlook while helping students deal with the death of a friend. Their strength and personal dedication to Maria's memory has also inspired Joe to make it through a troubled time.

"One of my biggest concerns was that Maria would get lost to time, but she really hasn't," said Joe. "I'm just very, very touched and pleased that some of the spiritual teachers here have taken her death and can use it to teach the children about spirituality and compassion for others."

Outside the front door of St. Jude is a memorial tree and plaque dedicated to Maria. Decorated with ribbons and hearts, it serves as a lasting reminder of the lonely flower and her friends.