

## A banner year for the Michelle O'Neill tourney

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**T**hough thunderclouds hovered overhead for most of the day, thousands crowded the Laurelton Boulevard beach last Saturday for the 19th annual Michelle O'Neill Volleyball Tournament — a benefit event that raises money to help the families of children who are undergoing treatment for catastrophic diseases and special needs by providing financial assistance for the costs that insurance does not cover.

Carol O'Neill is the founder of the Michelle O'Neill Foundation and volleyball tournament of the same name, which are dedicated to the memory of Carol's daughter, Michelle, who died of cancer in 1996 at age 24.

Over the years the event has grown from a few hundred competitors playing on 11 nets in 1997 to thousands of players and spectators packing the beach this year. In fact, O'Neill said that a record 333 teams participated, which should drive in the foundation's highest donation totals to date.

"Team Irie" took home their second win in the tournament's four-man competition while "Tito's On the Rocks" dominated the six-man division for their third time. Though the weather was clear for most of the day, heavy, gusting rains began to fall around 5 p.m., O'Neill said, though it couldn't dampen the competitive spirits of this year's teams.

"Our very crazy, dedicated volleyball players were in the midst of the playoffs and they continued and finished," O'Neill said.

Michelle didn't play volleyball, Carol explained, but was a fun loving and positive person that Carol felt embodied the spirit of

the community. "Since Long Beach is a volleyball town, my family thought that would be a fun way to carry on her personality," she explained. In its early years, the tournament was traditionally held in the West End but has steadily moved eastward, especially after the devastation of Hurricane Sandy. The last few tournaments have been held at Laurelton.

O'Neill said that the most rewarding aspect of organizing the event each year is getting to meet some of the children the foundation benefits. "That's what it's all about, to have them there," she explained. Four of the children were at this year's tourney: baby Allie, GianPaul, Dylan and Danny, who also said a few words to the crowd during the opening ceremony.

"No matter how tired you are, that gets you going," O'Neill added. The foundation recently sponsored Dylan and his dad to go to the Big Sky Kid's Camp in Montana, a 10-day wilderness experience for children with cancer. Carol said that she attended the camp herself with Michelle when she had been sick.

John Barnes acted as this year's emcee and O'Neill's great-niece Molly sang "God Bless America" to kick off the festivities. O'Neill also thanked the City of Long Beach for its cooperation organizing the event each year, particularly the police and sanitation departments as well as the Rec Center.

Next year the tourney will celebrate its 20th anniversary, a milestone O'Neill said she'd like to recognize in some way. "We haven't decided exactly how we're going to do it, but it will definitely be special," she said. Possible plans include a special anniversary shirt featuring all of the previous "Smileys" from past tournaments and a contest to see who can produce all of the 19 previous shirts.

Either way, O'Neill said it's important to recognize the 20-year milestone. "It's a wonderful accomplishment not just for the foundation but for the community, that they keep coming back each year."



Photos by Kristie Arden/Herald

**THE BEACH WAS PACKED** for this year's Michelle O'Neill volleyball tournament despite the threat of rain.



**THE MAGNOLIA BALL HOGS** in the heat of it against Bump Set Spike.



**ROB MCCURDY, FAR LEFT**, of Team Squid Squad spiked the ball over to Joe Guarrasi and Allie Logan of Team Alexa.



**DANNY MARQUINO, 11**, one of the children benefited by the Michelle O'Neill Foundation this year, thanked event organizer Carol O'Neill.



**ASSEMBLYMAN TODD KAMINSKY**, third from left, came down to cheer on the players, including 10-year-old Molly Matthaei, far left, and her dad, George Matthaei, as well as City Court Judge Corey Klein, Mike Egan, and Erik Marghella.