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CARL BURNETT JR. ASSISTANT EDITOR
740-681-4346, cburnett@lancastereaglegazette.com

Family awards first scholarship in late daughter-in-law's name

By Michelle George
Staff writer

LANCASTER — There was a lot to love about Michelle Byerlee-Black.

She was an avid teddy bear collector and devoted mother of two who loved all children, recalled her mother-in-law, Kathleen Black-Duffus, of Lancaster. She also was a woman of faith, so devoted to her church in Lancaster that she and her family would drive from Pennsylvania to Ohio every Sunday to attend services.

"She was a big part of the nursery there," Black-Duffus said of New Connections Community Church in Lancaster, which she attends with her husband, Ted Duffus. "She loved to be there."

When Byerlee-Black, who had diabetes, died in January 2007, her husband and the Duffus family discussed what they could do to help keep their loved one's memory alive in the wake of her sudden passing.

"She died very unexpectedly; she went to the hospital to have her tonsils removed and she died several days later, in the middle of the night," Black-Duffus said.

In 2011, with the help of a donation from Byerlee-Black's husband, Andy Black, the Duffus family decided to start a memorial fund with the hope of awarding scholarships in their daughter-in-law's



Michelle Byerlee-Black SUBMITTED

name.

This past week, the family gave away its first scholarship during a church service at New Connections Community Church, which recently relocated to The Ville Restaurant & Bakery in Lancaster.

The recipient of the \$100 scholarship was Marisah Johnson, a Fairfield Union graduate who plans to attend the Ohio University Lancaster Campus. Eligibility for the scholarship is based on a demonstration of Christian maturity, community service and a commitment to continued spiritual

growth in all areas of life.

"This is the first year we got a response from the community — we had four people (send in applications)," Black-Duffus said.

The memorial fund is one of two ways Byerlee-Black's loved ones are preserving her memory. In 2012, the family started the Tender Loving Bear Program at Fairfield Medical Center, in which teddy bears are delivered to young patients at the hospital on Valentine's Day — Byerlee-Black's birthday.

"We take them to the (emergency room) and they

distribute them throughout the day," Black-Duffus said. "We purchase the bears ourselves."

The program continued again this year, with 25 to 30 bears given to hospitalized children, Ted Duffus said.

"The staff at Fairfield Medical Center makes a big deal out of it and takes pictures and all that," Black-Duffus said. "It's a great tribute to Michelle; she loved bears."

Looking to the future, Black-Duffus said she and her family hope to continue to preserve Byerlee-Black's memory by growing both the scholarship fund and Tender Loving Bear Program.

"Right now, we're planning to give away one scholarship a year, but we'd like to do more," Black-Duffus said.

Residents who want to make a donation to the Michelle Byerlee-Black Memorial Fund can send a donation to New Connections Community Church, P.O. Box 2283, Lancaster, OH 43130. Residents who want to donate a teddy bear can contact Black-Duffus at 740-407-6460.