



# Kindling the Flame For Courtney

A twin keeps her sister's memory alive and saves hearts in Houston.



PHOTOGRAPH: MEG MCKINNEY

"We're saving lives," says Kindel VanCronkhite (left) with her mom, Trisha Maley. The two are cofounders of Courtney's Crusade.

She loved the competition of soccer at the University of West Florida as did her teammate and identical twin. So when Courtney and Kindel VanCronkhite graduated and embarked upon careers, they remained extremely close and stayed in great physical shape.

Courtney became engaged in 1999.

The twins' mom, Trisha Maley, was helping her plan the wedding. Then, on August 10 that year, Courtney died in her sleep. She was 24.

"I went from planning a wedding to planning a funeral," Trisha recalls.

Courtney's death was caused by long Q-T syndrome, a disorder of the heart's electrical rhythm that the twins inherited through their paternal side. Soon after the funeral, Kindel and an older sister, Kathryn, underwent surgery for internal defibrillators.

Next, Kindel turned grief into good works. She wanted to "start a benefit for Courtney and raise money to help save lives," she says. So the family, including Kathryn; her stepfather, Chuck Maley; and stepsister, Sherry Howard, created Courtney's Crusade.

"We decided we were going to celebrate Courtney's life, not mourn her death," Trisha says.

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*Trisha Maley*

Through this non-profit foundation they educate the community about sudden cardiac death and raise money to purchase automated external defibrillators (AEDs) for area schools and offices.

One big celebration takes place at the annual Courtney's Crusade fundraiser at a Houston restaurant, Grisby Grill. Owners David and Judi Coker and members of the restaurant staff volunteer their time.

At past events, high bidders have

claimed tickets donated from major airlines, sports memorabilia from the Houston Astros, and nights at plush local hotels such as the Magnolia Hotel Houston. Restaurants give gift certificates, and day spas offer packages. Camille Cain, the family's attorney, gives away baskets of her handmade soaps.

Last year, mainly through this event, family members raised nearly \$40,000. So far, they have placed defibrillators in 26 schools and businesses and will soon add 20 more.

Not every school or business has been cooperative. "We've had people turn us down for liability," Chuck comments with a sigh. Kindel wonders why fire extinguishers are required, but not AEDs. "Our heart is our battery. It's going to go out sometime," she states.

Trisha says Courtney was a shining star. And there are many other stars as well: Courtney's mom, her twin, and all her family who are striving to ensure that more young hearts will never break.

GARY D. FORD

## Sign Up for Courtney's Crusade

For more information visit [www.courtneyscrusade.com](http://www.courtneyscrusade.com), or write Courtney's Crusade, 3306 Ashfield Drive, Houston, TX 77082. Admission to the fifth annual Courtney's Crusade fund-raiser, September 30, 5 to 9 p.m., is \$25. Grisby Grill is located at 14555 Grisby Road. Call (281) 752-6990.