

## **Arts program, scholarships honor memory of IU grad Lindsey O'Brien Kesling**

Activities at local Boys and Girls Clubs funded by foundation

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April 2, 2013

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Dot Kesling was standing in the kitchen of her home in LaPorte in the fall of 2010 when she looked through a window and saw two police officers walking toward her front door.

Immediately, her heart began thumping in her chest. "Oh my God!" she thought, thinking of her two teenage sons. "One of the boys has been in a car accident."

The doorbell rang. She grabbed the knob with a shaky hand and opened the door.

"Can we please come in?" one of the officers asked.

"No," she said. "I want you to tell me what's happened."

"Please, Ma'am, can we come inside?" the officer said.

Reluctantly, Kesling allowed them into the foyer, then insisted they tell her immediately why they were there.

A grim-faced officer complied, telling her that her 22-year-old-daughter, Lindsey, had been found dead that morning in her Arizona apartment.

They said Lindsey had arrived home around 7 the night before, parked her car in the garage beneath her apartment, and unloaded some supplies for her pet dog — a boxer/terrier/chihuahua mix named Chillbe.

"That night, she called me and her boyfriend and one of her girlfriends, telling us about her day," Kesling said. "She was very upbeat, and excited about coming home for Thanksgiving, because one of her good friends was getting married in LaPorte and she would be attending the wedding."

But Lindsey had forgotten to turn off her car's engine.

"Lindsey was very high energy and always multi-tasking," Kesling said. "It was not uncommon for her to leave the car running and forget about it, and that's what happened this time."

Lindsey went to bed that night and never woke up. She, and Chillbe, died from carbon monoxide poisoning Nov. 9, 2010.

## **The Wishing Tree**

While attending Indiana University, Lindsey had been a Big Sister to Passiont Davis-Cardwell, a member of the Boys and Girls Clubs of Bloomington. Together, the two went bowling, visited ice cream shops, and picnicked in the park — forming such a tight bond that Lindsey continued mentoring the youngster even after Lindsey graduated from IU in 2010 with a degree in psychology.

Three weeks after Lindsey's death, Kesling phoned the club and asked program director Matthew Searle to break the news to Passiont. She added she would be mailing some of Lindsey's personal items — a purse, a piece of jewelry, and a photo of Lindsey — that she wanted Passiont to have as keepsakes.

Kesling resolved that something beautiful would emerge from her daughter's death. So she founded the Lindsey O'Brien Kesling Wishing Tree Foundation, a nonprofit that would support children through performing arts programs.

"I'd been looking for a way to honor Lindsey's short life by supporting her passions — children and the performing arts," Kesling said, adding that the foundation's name comes from Lindsey's fascination with a wishing tree she'd seen while traveling in England.

The foundation's mission is to "help children and young people achieve their highest potential, unleash their talents and act upon their dreams through a variety of creative and performing arts opportunities."

Kesling knew Searle had a long-harbored desire to develop a performing arts program at the club. So in the fall of 2011, after Kesling and Searle had spent weeks forming a collaborative vision, the Lindsey O'Brien Kesling Performing Arts Program was launched at the Boys and Girls Clubs of Bloomington.

The Lindsey O'Brien Kesling Wishing Tree Foundation funded the program the first year with a \$3,000 grant, and this year with a \$10,000 grant. Since its inception, the program has touched the lives of more than 200 young people.

## **Dancing large**

Lindsey's love for dance was born while in elementary school, when she took ballet and tap at a local dance studio. Later, she performed in plays. In high school, she became the captain and choreographer of a high school dance group, and later enrolled in a premier dance studio where she did hip hop, jazz, ballet and tap.

At age 17, Lindsey decided she wanted to study modern dance for a summer at the Interlochen Arts Academy in Michigan. She was one of 40 young people the academy admitted that summer from a pool of 350 applicants.

For Kesling, the performing arts program at the Boys and Girls Clubs of Bloomington is not only a way for Lindsey's love for children and the performing arts to live on, but a way to celebrate her life.

"She was effervescent, like the bubbles in a champagne glass, and had this wonderful laugh that came from her gut," she said. "Her mission was to embrace the minutes, work hard, dance strong, and never miss an opportunity to try something new."

In May 2011 — Lindsey’s birth month — friends and family members gathered in a field in northern Indiana for a “wishing tree ceremony” to commemorate her life. They circled a 10-foot-tall beech tree Lindsey had planted on a piece of family property, and placed slips of biodegradable paper on its branches — each slip containing someone’s dream or wish or prayer. Then they released more than 100 monarch butterflies into the sunlit sky.

Kesling said if Lindsey were alive today and could see how the performing arts program was affecting children, she would be pleased beyond measure.

“She would be screaming for joy from the mountaintops,” she said. “And she would be dancing so large.”

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Foundation website

The Lindsey O’Brien Kesling Wishing Tree Foundation website — [www.lokwishingtreefoundation.org](http://www.lokwishingtreefoundation.org) — will be up next week. Its mission is to “support young people in achieving their highest potential, unleashing their talents and acting upon their dreams through a wide variety of creative and performing arts opportunities.”



Indiana University graduate Lindsey O’Brien Kesling and her dog, Chillbe, died from carbon monoxide poisoning Nov. 9, 2010. Courtesy photo



Passiont Davis-Cardwell, left, who was mentored by the late Lindsey O'Brien Kesling through the Big Brothers Big Sisters program, poses with Lindsey's mother, Dot Kesling. Courtesy photo



Lindsey O'Brien Kesling in the spring of 2009, standing on top of a platform at Navy Pier in Chicago and celebrating life on a beautiful day. Courtesy photo.

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