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Literacy program to honor girl who drowned Author: Drew Brooks

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By Drew Brooks

Staff writer

A 6-year-old girl who drowned in the Lower Little River earlier this year will be memorialized through a literacy program, a nonprofit organization announced Saturday.

Ca'Zhia McMillian died in March after she fell into the river while playing on its banks with a friend.

The first-grader at Anderson Creek Primary School in Bunnlevel was missing for two weeks before authorities found her body about a mile from where she fell in.

During that time, her story caught the attention of Tommy and Gail McNeill of Durham.

Despite not knowing the family, the couple followed the story and were crushed when they found out the young girl was dead.

Soon afterwards, they decided to do something to honor her.

“When we heard about the loss of a young life, we had to move,” Tommy McNeill said.

After speaking with family and finding out that he and McMillian shared a love of fishing and reading, Tommy McNeill said he thought it would be fitting to establish a literacy program in her honor.

The Ca'Zhia McMillian Memorial Literacy Program was announced Saturday at the 25th anniversary of the Triangle Park Chapter of The Links Inc., a nonprofit organization that focuses on helping the African-American community.

McMillian's mother, Sharonda McNeill — no relation to Tommy — and five other family members attended the event at the Hilton Hotel in Research Triangle Park.

Tommy McNeill said he has had several brief conversations with the family but that meeting them face to face for the first time was an emotional experience.

“It was a very uplifting meeting,” he said.

Through the program, TPC Links Inc. will send someone to McMillian's elementary school each year to read to first-graders and provide refreshments for the students.

The McNeills made an initial donation of \$1,000 and said they plan on replenishing that money once it runs out.

Tommy McNeill said he and his wife also plan to include the program in their estate planning.

The McNeills, who own Gail's Hair Salon on Guess Road in Durham, have been active in community outreach for more than a decade, donating funding for programs to several nonprofit groups.

McMillian went missing March 24 and her body was found April 3.

Rescue personnel from several agencies across the Cape Fear region helped search for McMillian, but were hampered by fast-moving waters that were several feet higher than normal.

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