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NEIGHBORS

DRAGON RUN HIGHWAY
"Nate Rocks Heaven"



RUNNING FOR NATE:

*The Boerlin Family Celebrates
20 Years of the Dragon Run*



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BY MATTHEW RAPPA

For nearly four decades, **Craig** and **Lauren Boerlin** have been proud to call the Swedesboro-Woolwich area home, raising their family with a commitment to faith, education, and service. Those same values would later help them transform unimaginable loss into a lasting legacy that continues bringing the community together.

Every September during Childhood Cancer Awareness Month, they and their 29-year-old triplets, **Alaina**, **Maria**, and **Myles**, remember their son and brother, **Nate** — a compassionate teenager whose love of music, learning, faith, and family continues to inspire those who knew him and many who never had the chance to meet him.

In April 2007, Nate passed away suddenly at just 16 years old. His death was later attributed to an aggressive Stage IV brain cancer. A few months later, family friends approached the Boerlins with an idea: organize a community run and walk in Nate's memory. Named after the Kingsway Regional High School Dragons, where Nate was an accomplished student musician, the Dragon Run was born.

The Boerlin family and longtime family friends who helped bring the Dragon Run to life, from left: Maria, Alaina, Lauren, Nathaniel, Craig, Myles and Elizabeth "Lizzy" Boerlin, and Barbara and Michael Hochman. Nathaniel, Myles and Lizzy's son, was named in honor of his late uncle, Nate.



Triplets Maria, Myles and Alaina Boerlin continue to honor their late brother through the Dragon Run and his lasting legacy.

What began as a community's way of remembering a remarkable teenager has grown into one of South Jersey's most cherished traditions. On Saturday, Sept. 26, the event will celebrate its 20th anniversary, bringing runners, walkers, volunteers, current and former students, and families together as part of Swedesboro-Woolwich Day.

"The love the community has shown Nate — and our family — over the years has been more than we could've ever imagined," Lauren says.

Rooted in Community

Craig and Lauren settled in Mickleton after Lauren accepted a teaching position at Delsea Regional High School, where she spent more than 30 years in public education.

Lauren credits her mother for inspiring her to take that path. "I saw how happy it made her to help students learn," Lauren says. "I wanted to follow in her footsteps."

The Boerlins quickly fell in love with the Swedesboro-Woolwich area for its strong sense of community. "People don't just talk about helping others — they show up, and we've been blessed to experience that firsthand," says Craig.

The family's commitment to the community has always matched the generosity they have received from it. Even after retiring, Lauren remains active in the community, serving on Kingsway's Board of Education and Education Foundation, while also supporting the Little Red Schoolhouse and Alex's Lemonade Stand Foundation.

Today, the Boerlin siblings continue that tradition in their own ways. Alaina and Maria work in technology consulting, while Myles is a registered nurse. They remain active with the Dragon Run and Alex's Lemonade Stand Foundation while staying connected through family traditions, including trips to Bethany Beach, cheering on Philadelphia sports teams, and gathering at Botto's and the Swedesboro Diner.

Most importantly, Lauren says, they continue honoring Nate's memory by becoming "the best versions of ourselves."



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Remembering Nate

To understand the Dragon Run, you first have to understand Nate. "He was the complete package," his mom says. "He was smart, musically gifted, faithful, and just a genuinely good kid."

Nate loved music, school, his family, and, above all, the Phillies. Whether he was practicing percussion, studying for an exam, or spending time with friends — especially his best friend, Eric Deitz — he approached everything with quiet determination and genuine enthusiasm.

Inspired by his grandfather, a college music professor, Nate immersed himself in Kingsway's marching band, concert band, percussion ensemble, and regional music programs, where he found his "band family." He also participated in regional and university music programs, always looking for ways to improve as a musician.

One story captures his determination. During marching band season, Nate fractured his foot, making it impossible for him to perform a percussion marching drill. Rather than sitting out, he taught himself the marimba in just weeks so he could continue performing. "Nate never wanted to let his classmates down," Craig says.

He later helped Kingsway capture a state marching band championship, one of his family's favorite memories.

Although Nate's life ended far too soon, his influence never did. The Boerlins describe him as their "angel in heaven," whose example continues to inspire them to embrace every opportunity and find purpose even in life's most difficult moments.



Young Nathaniel Boerlin looks at a photo of his late uncle and namesake, Nate.

(Photo by Joe Warner Photography)



From left, Myles, Lauren, Craig, Maria and Alaina Boerlin hold a treasured photo of Nate beneath the Dragon Run Highway sign dedicated in his memory.



Nate Boerlin shares a special moment with his grandfather, who helped inspire his love of music.



Nate Boerlin performs with the Kingsway Regional High School marching band.

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From One Idea to a Lasting Tradition

Following Nate's passing, family friends Mike and Barbara Hochman called with an idea: organize a run and walk in Nate's honor.

The Boerlins immediately embraced it, even though they had never planned an event before. "We had no idea what we were doing," Lauren says with a laugh. "We never imagined it would go beyond the first year."

Instead, the Dragon Run has become something much greater than anyone expected — a celebration of Nate's life and a reminder that the Boerlins aren't carrying their grief alone. One of the family's most treasured memories from the inaugural event was hearing Amazing Grace performed by the Kingsway Marching Band.

In addition to the Hochmans, the Boerlins credit Swedesboro Mayor Tom Fromm for allowing the event to grow alongside Swedesboro-Woolwich Day. They also thank Kingsway Regional School District for embracing the event from the beginning. Under the leadership of Superintendent Dr. James Lavender, the district provides facilities, transportation, and support from students and staff.

"The electricity is unlike anything else," Alaina, Maria, and Myles say. "We truly believe Nate is watching over us."

Mike and Barbara Hochman helped launch the Dragon Run in Nate's memory and have remained an important part of the tradition ever since.

(Photos by Joe Warner Photography)

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A Legacy That Keeps Growing

Proceeds from the Dragon Run support the Nathaniel Boerlin Scholarship Fund, which recognizes two graduating Kingsway seniors who exemplify Nate's love of learning, music, perseverance, and service to others.

One of the earliest scholarship recipients was Nate's classmate Dylan Brewer, who later worked with Ozzy Osbourne,



Hundreds of runners and walkers gather at the starting line for the inaugural Dragon Run, beginning a tradition that has endured for two decades.

contributing to marketing efforts surrounding two of the rock legend's Grammy wins. "Each recipient reminds us that Nate's story continues through young people pursuing their dreams," Lauren says.

A portion of Dragon Run proceeds also benefits the Kingsway Education Foundation, extending Nate's legacy through new educational opportunities for students across the district.

More Than a Finish Line

Each September, race morning feels like a family reunion as friends reconnect, former classmates return home, and volunteers arrive before sunrise. When the event concludes, the celebration continues as Swedesboro-Woolwich Day fills downtown with live music and vendors.

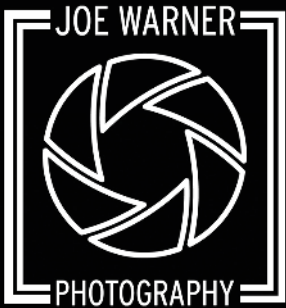
Looking ahead, the Boerlins hope the Dragon Run continues to grow in both participation and spirit.

"We hope it teaches people that out of darkness, there is light," Lauren says. "There will always be tragedies in life, but with support and love from others, life can still be beautiful."

To register for the Dragon Run on Saturday, Sept. 26, visit www.naterocksheaven.org or www.facebook.com/TheDragonRun.

For information about Swedesboro-Woolwich Day, visit www.swedesboroday.com.

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