

# THE ARLINGTON ADVOCATE

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## The quiet hero

By Emily Hunt

Special to the Advocate

When you walk into Martin Conneely's office, your eyes are not drawn to his desk or a décor on the wall. Instead, they're drawn to the black-framed silhouette portraits of Conneely's four daughters. Wearing his company shirt and jeans with a baseball cap, Conneely, 35, sits at his desk and talks on the phone with a client. His smile is contagious, his laugh warm — you can tell without even speaking a word to him that he is a family man, and more specifically, a loving father.

What you would never be able to tell, even after having a full conversation with Conneely, is that he is a cancer survivor.

Conneely, who was born and raised in Arlington, had been living a successful life. By 1997, he was starting a family with his high school sweetheart, Kerri. He had been running his own company, Conneely Contracting Inc., for six years.

But then, in 1998, Conneely was diagnosed with squamous cell carcinoma, the second most common form of skin cancer and the most common form of cancer found in the sinuses. The cancer attacked Conneely's sinonasal tracts. He was only 25 years old.

With the loving support of his family and friends, he promised to keep an upbeat, positive attitude throughout the entire process, he said.

"You can't have a 'why me?' attitude," Conneely said, "why anyone?"

Though he had days where he would feel hopeless, especially after countless surgeries that didn't go his way, Conneely's wife, family and friends kept him inspired to keep fighting. And after a

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Staff photo by Ann Ringwood

**Martin Conneely is organizing the 2nd Annual Charity Golf Tournament to benefit The Children's Room.**

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long, hard two-year battle with what seemed like endless surgeries, Conneely was able to overcome the cancer.

“I’m so blessed to have the people around me like I do,” Conneely said. “I’ve been so lucky.”

After his recovery, Conneely went back to his old life. He started work at his company again, and he continued to raise his family with Kerri, having three more daughters.

However, for Conneely, simply trying to pick up where he left off was not enough. A few years after Conneely recovered from the cancer, he decided that he wanted to give something back to the community.

In 2004, he decided to run a marathon to raise money for a charity. He was trying to find a local charity to raise money for when his friend, Steve McKenna, introduced him to The Children’s Room, a support center for children and teens who are grieving the loss of an immediate family member or a primary caregiver.

For Conneely, the charity hit close to home.

“When I found out about The Children’s Room, especially with me having four children of my own, I was so comforted to know that a place like it exists for those who aren’t as lucky as I was,” he said.

In their first marathon, Conneely and McKenna were able to raise over \$15,000 for The Children’s Room. Conneely ran three more marathons after that, until last year when he decided to switch gears and host a golf tournament instead.

“I wanted to get the entire community involved... and plus, it’s a fun event. It’s a win-win situation,” Conneely said.

Last year, the golf tournament was able to raise \$16,000.

“I’ve been blessed to work in this town,” said Conneely. “It’s an unbelievable community to be a part of. Everyone’s so supportive and caring.”

This year, he hopes that the golf tournament on August 22 at the Wayland Country Club will be as, or more, successful than last year.

“I think we need to support small, important charities like The Children’s Room,” Conneely said. “Who knows what can happen to us in a lifetime. People don’t know enough about the Children’s Room. They’ve got to see how special it is.”

The Children’s Room was founded in February 1993 by a group of healthcare professionals who were trained at the Dougy Center for Grieving Children in Portland, Oregon. It originally operated as part of Hospice West in Waltham. In April of 1999, The Children’s Room, Center for Grieving Children and Teenagers, Inc. opened in Arlington as an independent, non-profit organization, and was housed in the basement of the First Baptist Church of Arlington. In 2004, the center moved to its present location at 1210 Mass. Ave.

Today, The Children’s Room supports over 180 children, teens and their families by providing group support sessions based on age. Families do not have to pay to enroll, and once

families join, they can stay in the program for as long as they wish.

In addition, The Children’s Room answers over 700 calls a year, talking to parents, teachers and counselors who are working with grieving children and their families. Representatives and volunteers of the program also speak at schools to educate the community.

“At The Children’s Room, the kids are really understood,” said Donna Shraff, program director of The Children’s Room. “They feel the same, not different or alone.”

The Children’s Room’s funding relies solely on donations from individuals and corporate companies, so “people like Martin are essential to The Children’s Room,” says Shraff. She continues, “here at the Children’s Room, kids come because they feel safe. Martin provides the comfort and safety with his ongoing support. He’s a behind-the-scenes hero – so humble and selfless. To know that there are people like him in this world is inspiring.”