

## Painting auction aids sick boy's kin

When Sergio Ricciardi of Edison was 4 years old, he fell out of a shopping cart and hit his head. Aside from a little crying, Sergio showed no sign of injury. Still, his parents, Phyllis and Joe, were concerned and called their family physician.

The doctor said Sergio should be fine, but if he showed any symptoms, such as vomiting, they should take him to be examined. Five days later, Sergio started to vomit. Joe Ricciardi knew something was wrong and immediately took his son to the doctor.

An MRI of Sergio's head showed two tumors. Doctors acted right away, and within five days, they had him ready for surgery. After the eight-hour operation, the doctors came back with news no parent wants to hear: Sergio had cancer. It was a very rare and aggressive form, called pineoblastoma. Over the past two years, Sergio has gone through six cycles of chemotherapy, a bone marrow stem cell transplant and shuttling between New Jersey and New York University.

The crisis took an emotional and a financial toll on the Ricciardi family.

But help was on the way.

A friend introduced the Ricciardis to Family Reach. Family Reach is a nonprofit organization in Parsippany established in 1996 by the families of Kristine Morello-Wiatrak and Christopher Colango, who both passed away from pediatric cancers. Family Reach is dedicated to providing financial relief and support to families fighting pediatric cancers and other life-threatening illnesses.

On May 2, Family Reach held its 9th Annual Dinner Dance Fund-

raiser at the Mayfair Farms in West Orange. People enjoyed dinner and danced the night away to music from the 1950's by the Shepps, the Classics, the Excellents and the Emotions.

The evening was topped off by the auction of a painting by 14-year-old cancer survivor and aspiring artist, Piotr Kolodziej, to benefit Sergio. Instead of a typical bidding war, people made donations, wrote their name on the bill and dropped the money in a jar. The winner was then drawn randomly. The auction raised \$4,600 for the Ricciardi family. All in all, the dinner raised more than

\$100,000, breaking last year's record amount of \$75,000. Those proceeds will be distributed among families in need.

"To us, Sergio is a miracle. Out of all the bad things that have happened to us, it's the good people and organizations like Family Reach foundation that stand out. We feel like they are a part of our extended family — always willing to listen and help out when we need it," said Joe Ricciardi.

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LAUREN ZUMPANO

**Sergio Ricciardi, left, with his dad, Joe, hold a painting by 14-year-old cancer survivor Piotr Kolodziej at the 9th Annual Dinner Dance Fundraiser at the Mayfair Farms in West Orange.**

