

PETER JACKEL: Gehrig's dignity, struggle still inspiring his family



APRIL 30, 2012 5:00 AM • BY [PETER JACKEL](#)

Walking into a downstairs room of her Racine home and seeing the extraordinary collection of memorabilia she has acquired, Dawn Gehrig is emotionally taken back to a day to remember.

She sees in her mind a cluster of huge microphones from the era situated at home plate July 4, 1939. Hardened baseball players lining the basepaths are swabbing at their moistened eyes and the mythical, modest man, his muscles deteriorating from a fatal neuromuscular disease that would one day be

named for him, feebly shuffles over to the microphones to say farewell.

After stirring the Yankee Stadium crowd with his echoing, iconic words, "Today, I consider myself the luckiest man on the face of the earth," Lou Gehrig walks off into history.

He was a man who gave grace a face.

Nearly 63 years after perhaps the most emotional moment in the history of Major League Baseball, Dawn continues to cherish her connection with the late hero, who was a first cousin of her grandfather, Theodore Anton Gehrig Sr.

Dawn, who took back her Gehrig maiden name after her 22-year marriage ended in divorce, devotes much of her time scouring eBay in search of Lou Gehrig memorabilia to enhance her downstairs room. From yellowed newspaper articles trumpeting his Hall of Fame achievements to figurines, books, advertisements, photos and baseballs, you'll find it in that room.

Her unique connection and commitment came to light in a Jan. 5, 2007 story that appeared in the New York Times. Dawn had been bidding during an online auction for a newspaper from the 1932 World Series between the Yankees and Chicago Cubs against someone who turned out to be a reporter for the New York Times.

"We kept upping the bid," Dawn said, "Finally, he saw my name and he said, 'I'd better quit because I don't think you're going to stop bidding,' and I said, 'No, I'm not.' "

What this reporter got out his failed bid, though, was a unique story idea, which evolved into Dawn giving a first-person account of her passion for collecting Lou Gehrig artifacts. What Dawn got out of telling her story was a windfall, once the article was published.

"I started getting phone calls from a lot of different people who had been to games where

Lou Gehrig played,” said Dawn, a 56-year-old retired custodial engineer for the Unified School District. “I started getting sent articles and even an old scorecard. Anything and everything involving Lou Gehrig I was getting sent and I thought that was just great.”

But what pushes her story over the top is that Lou Gehrig lives on in Dawn’s home beyond her room full of artifacts. While the man has been dead since June 2, 1941, his spirit has illuminated the darkness for Amanda Mireles, Dawn’s 27-year-old daughter who has endured an unrelenting succession of major medical setbacks.

“She got cancer at 17, then she had her hip replaced at 18, at 19 she got cancer again and got a bone marrow transplant, at 20 she had a child who passed away and then she was blessed with two more children but has pre-cancer now,” Dawn said. “But she feels like the luckiest women on earth because she’s survived everything and had children.”

Isn’t that the Gehrig way? From 1925 until a disease that still has no cure diminished his skills in 1939, Lou Gehrig appeared in 2,130 consecutive games at first base for the Yankees. Playing most of his career in the massive shadow of Babe Ruth, Gehrig showed up for work every day, ignored mounting aches and pains to produce a staggering body of work, never popped off about not being appreciated and simply underscored the very definition of the word, “dignity.”

Mireles carries on his legacy by lighting a candle in the darkness instead of cursing it.

“Being related to Lou Gehrig and hearing about the illness he had to endure has really inspired me,” Mireles said. “He was so brave throughout his battle. This inspired me be brave during my trials.

“I have always tried to look at the positive side of life rather than the negative.”

With this positive conviction has come rewards. She has been diagnosed with pre-leukemia, but her last three biopsies have come back normal. And then there’s her son, who just might be patrolling first base at Yankee Stadium himself one day.

“My son, Adriano, is only 2 years old and loves baseball,” Mireles said. “He is a lefty just like Lou Gehrig was, so we’ll see what happens.”

The memory of Lou Gehrig is preserved through the ever-expanding collection of artifacts in a basement room of Dawn’s house.

But the spirit of Lou Gehrig, and what a powerful spirit it is, lives on through Dawn’s daughter, who is also determined to never quit.

Peter Jackel is a reporter for The Journal Times. You may reach Peter at (262) 631-1703 or by email at peter.jackel@lee.net