Moorestown names park for heroic doctor

BY CAROL COMEGNO • COURIER-POST STAFF • APRIL 29, 2010

MOORESTOWN — Many friends and colleagues of a Moorestown doctor who died on military duty in Iraq did not want him to be forgotten by the community. Some called or approached township officials and asked what could be done to preserve his memory.

One of those friends was neighbor Karen Cooper. She lives on the same street as the family of Dr. John Paul Pryor and first met Pryor's wife at a bus stop when their children started school together four years ago.

"After I heard about John's death, I had such a feeling of helplessness and wanted to do something meaningful for the family aside from helping out with things like carpooling our children," she said. "I wanted to provide help in building something lasting."

Cooper eventually led a fundraising effort that led to Sunday's dedication of a park honoring the life of the selfless doctor, a member of the U.S. Army Surgical Unit and an assistant professor of surgery and director of the trauma department at University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine. He died as a result of injuries from a mortar attack near his living quarters in Mosul, Iraq, on Christmas Day 2008.

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More than $4,000 in donations were raised to pay for a new rustic sign that renamed Salem Park c Salem Road the John Pryor, M.D., Park. The park is home to several sports fields.

"We were absolutely overwhelmed by the outpouring of support and the contributions that came in for the sign in the park, especially in this economy," Cooper said. "I had spoken to the mayor and the park came up. We found out it had never been dedicated to anyone and township council later approved the renaming."

Cooper said donations are still coming in and will be used to pay for a brass plaque that will be engraved with a biographical sketch about his life.

Mayor Daniel Roccato called the ceremony at the park poignant, emotional, memorable and inspirational.

"This is a way the community can see his legacy forever," said Roccato, who knew the family and who called the ceremony bittersweet. "Obviously, we miss John, but at the same time it was great to see the community come together for the park."