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North Castle family keeps daughter's memory alive in Vermont

By **SEAN GORMAN**
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NORTH CASTLE — Laura Winterbottom, a former North Castle resident, was slain a year ago in Vermont when she was only 31, but her family and friends are donating money to causes she cared about to keep her memory alive.

They've created a fund to give to organizations that fit the 1991 Byram Hills High School graduate's passion for art and nature.

"We try to select charities that would have meaning to Laura," said JoAnn Winterbottom, Laura's mother and fund president. "We don't want her to be forgotten. She was a very kind, gentle person who really cared about the kinds of things, the kinds of organizations, that we've decided to donate to."

Yesterday marked the one-year anniversary of Winterbottom's slaying in Burlington, Vt., where she lived. Gerald Montgomery, 34, of Burlington is accused of beating, strangling and sexually assaulting Winterbottom. Court officials are awaiting the results of a recent mental evaluation to see if he is fit to stand trial. The next court hearing in the case is scheduled for Wednesday.

"It was a big tragedy for the community here," said Bill Nordberg, 33, of Burlington. "The fund is a way for us to focus our energy and love for Laura."

The Laura Kate Winterbottom Memorial Fund began in November and has collected about about

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\$10,000. It gave three \$1,000 donations in recent months to the Burlington City of Arts' Art from the Heart Program, the Vermont Institute for Natural Science and Vermont's Women Helping Battered Women program, which provides shelter and support for women who have been abused.

"It will be a great support to many women and children," said Anera Foco, director of Women Helping Battered Women. "This (Winterbottom's slaying) has been a terrible injustice to women."

Winterbottom, who moved to Burlington seven years ago, taught art to elementary school children. She had hoped to become a full-time teacher one day. She earned a graduate degree in graphic design from the College of New Rochelle and was an avid quilter who enjoyed painting and photography.

Her love of teaching art to children prompted the fund to donate \$1,000 to Art from the Heart, a program where Winterbottom volunteered that brings painting supplies to children who are patients at Fletcher Allen Hospital in Burlington. She was always doing some kind of outdoor activity like mountain biking and hiking, Nordberg said.

Her friend, Debbie Gilbert, recalled yesterday how she came across a bug during a Vermont nature hike with Winterbottom in 2004. Gilbert said she was disgusted by the little caterpillar-like worm, but Winterbottom came running over and picked it up, describing what it was for her fellow hikers.

"She just loved being outside. She loved animals," said Gilbert, 39, of Burlington. "When we were hiking, she was always the one who would get distracted by an insect. She would pick them up."

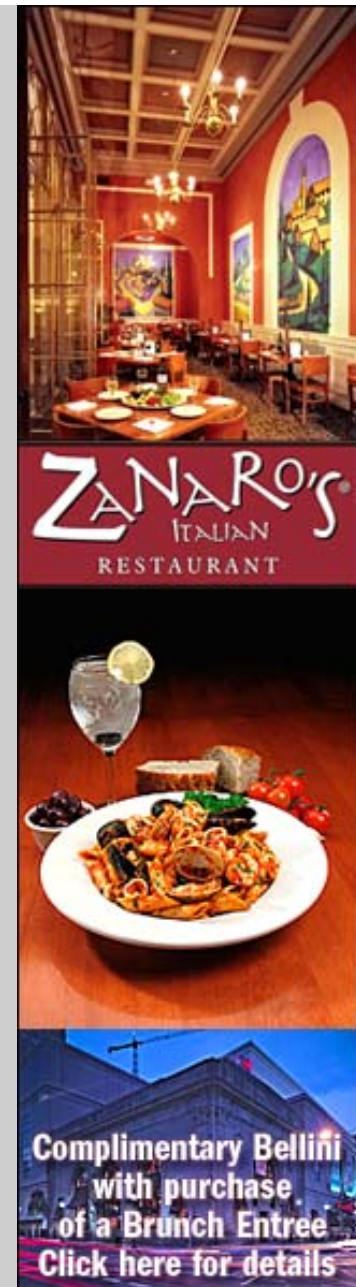
She was also a bird lover who was particularly keen on rare birds of prey. The donation to the Vermont Institute for Natural Science helps support a center that nurtures injured birds back to health, including owls, eagles and falcons.

"Laura was interested in nature, science, education," said Jason Drebitko, the institute's president. "We're pleased we can represent those areas on her behalf."

The fund also purchased four memberships to the ECHO Science Center and Lake Aquarium in Burlington. The memberships were donated back to ECHO and will be given to needy community groups.

Winterbottom had gone out with friends and her sister the night before her slaying. She was found by neighbors March 8, 2005, in her Ford Focus, which was parked in Burlington's Old North End neighborhood a short drive from her home.

Burlington Police Chief Thomas Tremblay said he couldn't comment on the case because of a court gag order, but he did speak about the family's creation of the memorial fund.



"I think it's fantastic they have created something positive out of this terrible tragedy," Tremblay said.

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