

Donald F. Jarrell Jr., teacher, triathlete

St. Tammany bureau

Donald F. Jarrell Jr., a retired special education teacher and triathlete whose two-year battle with Lou Gehrig's disease rallied a community around him, died Tuesday at his home in Covington. He was 42.

Mr. Jarrell, who worked with special needs children in St. Tammany Parish schools and founded the Team Earthquake cycling and triathlon training team, immediately drew the support of western St. Tammany residents when he was diagnosed with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis in March 2003.

Athletic events such as triathlons, along with social galas, raised money for the Donnie Jarrell Fund, providing him and his family with financial help for medical treatment and equipment, including a van and a wheelchair tailored to his needs.

"There were so many people that Donnie touched and helped, and he never asked for anything in return," said Steve Sperier of Mandeville, a friend of Mr. Jarrell's for more than 22 years. "The people in this community saw an opportunity to give back to the person who had helped them so much."

"From teaching an adult how to swim or to get through that first triathlon, to going the extra mile for a special needs child, to stopping his ride to help you change a flat tire on your bike, even giving you his giving spare tube, the whole community realized what a nice and giving person he was," Sperier said. "He was a part of so many people's lives."

Sperier said the outpouring of support from the community gave Mr. Jarrell the drive to fight the disease with all his strength. "He fought harder than in any competition he'd ever been in," he said. "It also gave him a sense of peace and accomplishment. He died knowing that there were a huge



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group of people that loved him and supported him, and knowing that his wife, Tonya, and daughter, Logan will be taken care of."

Mr. Jarrell was a lifelong resident of Covington. He was a graduate of Covington High School, and Southeastern Louisiana University, where he received a master's degree in education. He was the swim coach for 20 years and a fitness instructor at Franco's Athletic Club near Mandeville.

He was a member of Oak Knoll and River Oaks Country Clubs, and the Church of the King. He participated in Iron Man and triathlon competitions.

Survivors include his wife, Tonya Johnson Jarrell; a daughter, Logan Alana Jarrell; his mother, Vernie Gitz of Madisonville; his stepmother, Edith Jarrell of Sun; three brothers, Kevin Jarrell of New Orleans and Brian Gitz and Alfred Gitz Jr., both of Madisonville; and two sisters, Vicki Jarrell of Columbus, Ohio, and Terena Shaw of Sun.

A funeral will be held Friday at 11 a.m. at Church of the King, 22205 Little Creek Road, Mandeville. A reception will follow at the Lake Pontchartrain Basin Maritime Museum in Madisonville. Burial will be private. Bagnell & Son Funeral Home is in charge of arrangements.