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Michael O'Keefe's mother died at 67 after a year-long battle with leukemia, and his loss has become a big net gain for the Leukemia & Lymphoma Society and other causes.

O'Keefe is a major player in the society's Team in Training program, raising nearly \$5,000 for the charity while preparing to run the 13.1-mile Atlanta half marathon on Thanksgiving Day and the 26-mile Disney Marathon in January.

Coincidentally, O'Keefe opened his second Foster's Grille restaurant last week in the Crabapple area of Milton. It is as much a leap forward for freshly-made giant burgers and hand-cut fries as it is for philanthropy.

Every Tuesday night at Foster's, on Bethany Bend in Alpharetta, O'Keefe donates 10 percent of the restaurant's take toward leukemia research.

He is also helping other fundraising causes at that location, but the leukemia group is the charity that's closest to his heart.

The Leukemia & Lymphoma Society's Team In Training is the world's largest endurance sports training program. It provides training to run or walk marathons and half marathons or to participate in triathlons and 100-mile bike rides. Since 1988, more than 300,000 participants have helped raise more than \$700 million.

Now, when the aches and pains of a 16-mile training run creep up on his 40-year-old body, O'Keefe thinks about what his mother went through.

"I think when you have a cause, something that's driving you, it helps you along," he said. "And then there's the memory of my mother. If I'm feeling a little sore or whatever, I sit there and think, 'This is nothing compared to what she went through.' "

A soccer player in college, O'Keefe was accustomed to training, but in short sprint work. "Never this endurance thing," he said.

He ran 16 miles two weeks ago with 30 members of his Team in Training, and 10 miles last weekend.

"It's amazing how easy it is to go through," O'Keefe said. "I'll be honest with you, I don't know what's causing it but I'm able to run it and do it. I'm not the last one coming in. I'm generally one of the first."

He runs with a woman whose son battled leukemia as a 4-year-old and survived.

"I have two little daughters," O'Keefe said. "I can't imagine them having leukemia at 4 or 5 years old and having to suffer at that young age when they haven't lived their life."

O'Keefe drove up weekly to visit his mother in a Richmond hospital, after she was diagnosed with acute leukemia.

"You don't know how long she's going to live at that point," O'Keefe recalled. "So we went up, spent a week. She seemed to be doing OK. I came back. Five days later I get a call, 'She's got 24 hours to live, you've got to get up here.' I hauled back up there, spent another 5 to 6 days. She seemed to be stabilizing. Then I get a call that she's got less than 12 hours to live, get up here as quickly as you can. I get another call a half hour later. She didn't make it.

"That's the roller coaster of emotion that people go through. So I know other families are going through similar things."

Not that O'Keefe wasn't a charitable guy before all this. But he was the typical too-busy corporate type during a 17-year career in telecommunications and software marketing to really get involved.

"My wife and I would donate money but we really had no time to do more. I should say it like this: We felt like we never had the time, we never made the time. The reality is you get so busy in life, you don't make the time to do it.

"Well, with a restaurant and the type of environment we want to be, it's given us an avenue to say, hey, now we can really do some things for the community."

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