

# Teens' legacy lives on in new hospital unit

Firelands pediatric unit named for Michelle Wightman and Karrie Wieber, who died in 1989 car-train crash

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## SANDUSKY

Firelands Regional Medical Center just became a little cheerier.

On Tuesday, Erie County's only hospital unveiled its new Michelle Wightman and Karrie Wieber Pediatrics Unit, a \$250,000 facility scheduled to open Dec. 15.

The unit was dedicated to the two teenage girls who died in a car-train crash at the city's Remington Avenue railroad crossing in 1989. Filled with colorful murals and playful scenes from around Sandusky, the unit is designed to comfort and uplift the hospital's youngest patients.

The Wightman-Wieber Foundation, a charitable organization started by the daughters' mothers, partly funded the project.

"Seeing that our daughters (died so young), we wanted to do something for kids," said Darlene Lowery, the mother of Michelle Wightman. "It's going to be good for the community. It's going to be something special."

The two girls, both sophomores at Sandusky High School, died 19 years ago when a Conrail train struck them on a February evening. The girls couldn't see the oncoming train because of another train that had stopped near the crossing on an adjacent track.

In 1996 a jury awarded the parents a substantial settlement, and in 2000 they began the Wightman-Wieber Foundation.

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Provided photo

**Karleen Wieber, mother of Karrie Wieber, and Darlene Lowery, mother of Michelle Wightman, pose beside one of the murals in the new pediatric wing at Firelands Regional Medical Center named for their daughters.**

## PEDIATRICS

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Since then the seven-person foundation has given \$2 million to local charities.

Although its donation to Firelands Regional Medical Center was not disclosed, Alice Springer, the hospital's director of development, called it "substantial and very generous."

The medical center also received significant donations from the Kiwanis Club, Bob and Beth Mathews and many others.

Gene Kidwell, president of the board of trustees for Wightman-Wieber and principal at Sandusky High School when the crash occurred, praised the hospital for spending the money wisely. He said he particularly loved the murals, which are in the hallways and the patients' rooms.

"I really thought they did a

tremendous job," he said. "As a retired educator, I know there are studies that show these things — colors, cheerful pictures — can help these kids' moods and, I guess, their health."

The new unit will have 10 private rooms, replacing the four semi-private rooms the current pediatrics unit has.

It will also have better equipment, and through a partnership with University Hospitals in Cleveland, will have pediatric specialists in Sandusky. Consequently, many Sandusky patients who previously had to travel to Cleveland for even simple procedures can now receive that care at Firelands Regional Medical Center.

Carol Sicha, an artist from Toledo, painted the much-lauded murals throughout the unit.

The murals include children playing around the city, with motifs such as ice cream, Lake Erie, Cedar

Point, fishing and animals recurring throughout the hallways and rooms. Sicha vivified the scenes with unusually varied, bright colors.

"It was awesome," said Karleen Wieber, Karrie's mother. "Very bright, very cheerful. It's going to look super nice when it's done."