

ALS benefit's message blossoms

By George Merritt
Denver Post Staff Writer

Monday, August 30, 2004 - A few months ago, the Tripping Griswolds agreed to play a little gig in their neighbor's driveway to support a sick friend.

But on Sunday, they found themselves on a large stage playing to a crowd organizers estimated at 2,000.

What happened in the interim stands as a tribute to a community. More than 70 people have for months focused their attention on Lisa Nichols and her family.

Nichols was diagnosed this spring with ALS - more commonly known as Lou Gehrig's disease. An ALS diagnosis means eventual death. And the costs of treating the disease are so vast that it commonly bankrupts families.

Nichols' neighbors, friends and even the mail carrier have done whatever they could to organize a fundraiser for her family and others with ALS.

Sunday's event at Village Greens Park in Greenwood Village was the culmination of their efforts, raising more than \$100,000.

"This is really a celebration of family, of life, of community, love and all the gifts that Lisa has given us," said neighbor Katie Murray Kleeman.

Kleeman has juggled the responsibilities of a job and five children along with the logistics of a festival for the last several months. "I'm so proud to be a part of this."

At one point, Kleeman and others - who call themselves Band Together - had hoped to attract 200 people. Since then, Greenwood Village officials volunteered the city's services. Politicians volunteered their time for a silent auction, and media attention snowballed.

The crowd barely fit on the soccer field where the event was held.

"It is just awesome," said Brian Cook, a board member of the ALS Association's Rocky Mountain chapter. "This is one incredible group of people because they did this completely by themselves. One of the biggest hurdles we face is awareness, so this is really incredible."

Nichols was joined Sunday by her husband, her brother and her seven children. She said the affection she received was overwhelming.

"This has really been amazing," she said. "Everyone has worked so hard."

Linda Parr, who also has ALS, said she hopes to see the event continue every year.

"It's important that more people know about this disease," she said. "Support like this - that is what keeps you going."

Staff writer George Merritt can be reached at 303-820-1191 or gmerritt@denverpost.com.