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The Michigan state house and senate approved resolutions Wednesday designating April 2011 as Michigan Student Athlete Cardiac Awareness Month - perhaps another step in the healing process for a state that was in the national spotlight after the tragic death of high school basketball star Wes Leonard on March 3.

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The designation isn't a new one. In fact, it's happened for the past several years. But Randy Gillary, the co-founder of the [Kimberly Anne Gillary Foundation](#), knows that this year's designation holds a bit more significance, after the [very public circumstances surrounding the death of Leonard](#), the Fennville (Mich.) High basketball star.

"I definitely think this has received more attention this year," Gillary said.

The resolutions were made in honor of both Leonard and Kimberly Gillary.



Gillary family photo

**15-year-old Kimberly Gillary was an avid swimmer and member of her school's water polo team prior to her death in April 2000.**

Kimberly Gillary was a 15-year-old water polo team member at Troy (Mich.) Athens when she collapsed on the pool deck in April 2000. She died a couple of days later after being taken off life support. Her family later learned that their daughter had hypertrophic cardiomyopathy, otherwise known as HCM or a muscle-bound heart, a condition very similar to Leonard's.

The Gillary family created the foundation in memory of their daughter the day after she died. Since then, it has raised more than 1.1 million dollars and placed more than 550 automated external defibrillators in high schools across the state of Michigan.

Randy Gillary, Kimberly's father, said that this year's resolutions, which were modified from recent years to include Leonard, hopefully will become the beginning of a bigger movement within the state.

"We're hoping it affects long-term cultural change," he said. "We want AEDs to become the norm. We want AED drills to become the norm. We want students learning CPR in school to become the norm."

Gillary said that the ultimate goal would be to have all student-athletes in the state screened for cardiac issues prior to participating in sports. But he also realizes that's an expensive undertaking.

"The kids that we're losing, if they would have been checked in advance, they might still be here," he said.

Some groups have started sponsoring screenings for students at a minimal fee, including one [announced just this week in West Michigan](#) to be held in early June. That screening will provide electrocardiogram, or EKG, screenings to 200 athletes.

Leonard was one of [five high school athletes across the nation](#) that died of similar cardiac illnesses over an 11-day span in March, and one of 47 in the state of Michigan that have died since 1999.

Since his death, Leonard has received numerous basketball awards posthumously. He was named to the Associated Press Class C all-state first team and was named [player of the year by the Holland Sentinel](#), a local newspaper.

Leonard's mother, Jocelyn Leonard, told the paper in late March that her son was still receiving recruiting letters from several colleges. She said she sends them thank you notes.

"I'm still glad they sent it to us," she [told the paper](#). "It means a lot to get those letters."

The Fennville area also [received](#)

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recognition Thursday as the co-recipient of the West Michigan Character Council's Good Character award. The school's fans shared the honor with officials from Hope College, which allowed Fennville to play its playoff games at its facility to accommodate the large crowds.

Randy Gillary said that while their children are now tied together by the resolutions, he has not yet spoken with the Leonard family. But it's a situation he completely understands.

"You never really get over it," he said of losing a child. "You have to learn to live with it and you can't let it destroy you."

He said his family learned to co-exist with its loss by helping others. He hopes eventually some day that the Leonard family can do the same.

"We want to use our efforts to prevent this from happening to other families," he said.

Those efforts continue on, as Gillary also hopes that next year legislation will be enacted to permanently designate April as Student Athlete Cardiac Awareness Month.

He is working with state Sen. John Pappageorge and state Rep. Tim Bledsoe, the sponsors of this year's resolutions, to help get the bill presented before April 2012.

It's just another step in the processes of both prevention and healing.

"We're going to keep plugging away at it," he said.

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Photo courtesy Sen. John Pappageorge  
State Sen. John Pappageorge (center) stands in the Senate chamber with (from left) Randy and Sue Gillary and their daughters, Emily Kucinich and Jennifer Gregory on Wednesday.

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