

'It shook my foundation': After girl's drowning, Logan Square garden honors her memory, offers hope to others



Purple coneflowers grow in Sofia Khan Garden, tucked away in the corner of Haas Park in Logan Square. (Chris Sweda / Chicago Tribune)



By **Heidi Stevens**

Balancing Act

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On the southwest corner of Logan Square's Haas Park playground, next to a state-of-the-art soccer field where kids in cleats run daytime scrimmages and families spread blankets for nighttime movies, a tiny, beautiful garden has taken root.

It bears the name of a girl who used to play there, back when there was no soccer field. Back when a baseball diamond took up most of the play space and home plate sat in that same southwest corner, the one where purple coneflowers and blue lupine plants now grow.

"Sofia Khan Garden," reads a little blue sign — unassuming in stature, extraordinary in purpose.

“It has Sofia’s name on it,” said Sheri Khan, Sofia’s mom, “but I want it to be for everyone.”

Sofia died in 2010 when she was 9 years old. Her family was on vacation near Holland, Wis., when Sofia drowned in Lake Michigan during a kayaking accident.

“I lived in a bubble where horrible things happened to other people and not me,” Khan told me. “I lived that way for a very long time, until something happened to my family that really shook my worldview. It shook everything. It shook my foundation. It shook my faith. It shook my everything.”

Friends told her she’d be OK; her family would be OK. She wasn’t sure she believed them. But she made a choice, she said, to try.

“It’s an intentional choice,” she said. “Every day. Every day I choose to believe we’re going to be OK. My kids are going to be OK. My family’s going to be OK.”

She wants Sofia’s garden to help others make that same choice.

“Holding onto that hope that you can heal is huge,” she said. “And the worst mistake we can make is to think we’re alone. The moment we start thinking that, it makes it even harder to make that choice to heal.”

Haas Park was Sofia’s second home. She and her two older brothers, Noah and Zane, would walk outside, cross the alley and run through the dirt to the old playground. Sofia attended the summer camp. She played on the softball team.

“She was like a bubbling fountain,” said Joe Henry, longtime Haas Park supervisor. “Just such a joy and pleasure to be around. She’d be out there playing football with the boys, soccer, you name it.”

Henry pushed to have the playground named after Sofia, but bureaucratic red tape kept stalling that endeavor.

“We just wanted something that would fit the personality of our little friend,” Henry said. “Something to add to her memory and her legacy.”

Bridget Montgomery, a neighbor whose son used to play with Sofia at the park, had the idea for a garden. She launched a [GoFundMe page](#) to raise money for plants and a bench, maybe a few boulders, a sign.

She raised a little more than \$3,000 and, along with Henry, attended Haas Park advisory council meetings for years to advocate for the garden.

On June 30, it finally came to be. The park hosted a small dedication ceremony.

“We want to make it a little sanctuary,” Montgomery, a Chicago Public Schools counselor, said. “I want people to be able to go there and be peaceful and reflective.”

She wants people to know who Sofia was.

“A whole crop of new folks have moved to Logan Square who don’t even know the Khans,” Montgomery said. “I want to keep adding to the garden and expanding the garden, so people know Sofia and know the garden’s purpose.”

Sofia’s body was never recovered from Lake Michigan. The U.S. Coast Guard searched for her. Four separate dive teams searched for her. All to no avail.

“We don’t have a gravesite,” Khan said. “When I see her name on something, that’s very important to me. She has a plaque at St. Helen, where she went to school. I get to see her name on a brick wall, and that’s important. I think that’s why something like this garden means so much to our family.”

Noah is 21 now. Zane is 18. Khan and her husband, Omer, had another daughter in 2012. Emaan, which means faith, is now 6. She attends day camp at Haas.

“Emaan knows the park is special,” Khan said. “She knows there’s a special place for all of us here.”

On Sept. 9, Khan is planning to host a remembrance ceremony at the garden.

“For anyone who’s lost anyone,” she said. “We’ll have river rocks that you can paint your loved one’s name on, and we’ll place them in the garden. It’s a community. It’s important for people to know they’re not the only ones going through something hard.”

A few years after Sofia died, when Khan learned to make room for sorrow, but also glimpses of joy, as part of her daily routine, she enrolled at DePaul University to earn a master’s degree in education with a focus on mental health. She wants to better understand her own grief and help others through theirs.

She graduated on the eighth anniversary of Sofia’s death. She carried Sofia’s picture.

“I’m called to help people when they go through something like this,” she said. “I had no clue what to expect. I had no clue how to help myself. I’m called to provide people hope in whatever form that looks like. To ignore that calling would be the death of my soul.”

The garden helps. And it hurts.

“It’s bittersweet,” she said. “It’s still very difficult to see her name like that.”

She paused.

“But it’s very kind,” she said. “The fact that they’ve done this and they continue to welcome us in. I can never find the words to say enough gratitude. I don’t feel like we have the words in our language to express deep gratitude for people’s kindness.”

Sofia loved dirt.

“Dirt, dirt, dirt,” Khan said. “She was always digging and playing. She was very spirited. She was just the light of our worlds, for sure.”

It’s meaningful, I think, that hope and growth would take root in her name.

“If my story, my family’s story, Sofia’s story can help even one person, I have to share it,” Khan said. “I have to do that in her honor.”

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