

"Warren Woman Helps People With Eating Disorders"
By JASON GOEMAAT, Staff Writer

Gail Schoenbach, who has dealt with her eating disorder more than half her life, has a message for those people: You are not alone, there is help. Schoenbach, 42, is the founder of For Recovery & The Elimination of Eating Disorders (FREED) foundation, a non-profit organization dedicated to providing financial support for proper treatment of such disorders, public awareness to understand their detriments and elimination of any stigma associated with the diseases. "Part of what we are trying to do is bring awareness to that (eating disorders) so that insurance companies, the regular public...understand it (an eating disorder) needs as much attention and value and equality as medical conditions do," said Schoenbach. Towards that end, on Thursday, Sept. 18 FREED hosted its inaugural Golf Invitational Event at the Twin Brooks Country Club in Watchung. Schoenbach said more than 150 people turned out for the golf outing/reception and raised more than \$35,000. The foundation has raised more than \$60,000 in its inaugural year. Most of the funds will be distributed between national and state eating disorder associations, and the Renfrew Center Foundation, the eating disorder treatment center Schoenbach used in her recovery, with locations throughout the northeast and the one she used in Coconut Creek, Fla. Gail's Story Schoenbach's first destructive eating habits began in 1979 as a freshman at Rider College in Lawrenceville. She began to diet and skip meals to lose weight. Then she started purging her food so she wouldn't gain the weight back. Her bulimia went unchecked during her college years, though towards the end a few friends went to her parents with their concerns, but never confronted Schoenbach. She kept her bulimia a secret throughout her early career as a securities representative, through her marriage to her husband Robert and through the birth of their three children from 1991 to 1996 and beyond. This is common among many with eating disorders, the director said. "It's a very unspoken, shameful, closet kind of disease," she said adding that it's not as accepted as other mental health issues. Schoenbach describes the many years bulimia went unchecked as an "exhausting" time of living a "double life." Outwardly, she was a woman in control of a successful life, though privately she found herself losing daily battle with bulimia. Eventually, Schoenbach made quiet effort to get help, but she said brief periods of therapy and medication had no lasting benefit. In 2000, she said two of her close friends went to her husband with their concerns about her health. After researching eating disorders on his own, he told her he was there to help her and recommended she seek treatment at the Renfrew Center in Ridgewood. In June 2000, she began a successful year in the center's outpatient program, but in September 2001 she had a "major relapse" after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. "I started feeling very out of control...and very unsafe," Schoenbach said. The Chestnut Hill Road resident said that things were going on around her she couldn't control, and she started relying on her purging as "the only thing I was really able to control." Two days after the attacks, her pharmacy made a mistake with her medication sending her to the hospital for four days. By the end of November, she said she was in bad shape and needed inpatient help. "If I didn't go and do something serious to break my behavior, I was probably going to be dead." She spent five weeks at Renfrew's inpatient facility in Coconut Creek, Fla. She came home with the confidence she could control her disorder and committed to ongoing therapy to insure recovery, which she continues to this day. Shortly after returning home, she conceived the idea of a foundation for those suffering from eating disorder and as an essential part of her own therapy. "I feel like (if) somebody like me, that has been suffering for so long was able to get well, I really believe that it's possible

for anybody." Gail and Robert Schoenbach, a general contractor have three children: Dana, a seventh grader at Warren Middle School, and Jamie and Jake, fifth and first graders, respectively, at Central School respectively. Anyone interested in learning more about FREED can contact Schoenbach at 908-756-9260 or email her at: gailsfreedfdn@aol.com

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