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A run for awareness, compassion

EJ Autism Jigsaw Run kicks off despite threatening weather

By RICK CHALIFOUX

EAST ISLIP—Over 1,200 people flocked to the East Islip Marina in the morning hours of Sunday, April 22, to support the EJ Autism Foundation in its 6th Annual Jigsaw 4-Mile Run/Walk for Autism. Persistent warnings of stormy weather were clearly not enough to deter the participants from attending and their resolve paid off as the rain held off just in the nick of time for the event to finish. It all made for a morning filled with good vibes and a collective sense of accomplishment as the event demonstrated both the benefits of physical activity and supporting a worthy cause during National Autism Awareness Month.

East Islip resident Linda Karika attended the event with her two friends, Sue Collora and Eleanor Diorio, also East Islip residents. Both Karika and Collora teach special needs students at Ruth C. Kinney Elementary School, while Diorio's son is in the special needs program at Connetquot Elementary School.

"It's a fun way for us to get out and support the kids, which is a big deal for us," said Karika. "This is my second year here, and it's so nice to gather with other people who share the same feelings and want to contribute."

The EJ Autism Foundation is a 501(c)(3) public charity situated in East Islip and started in 2005 by Bea Huste-Petersen, a physician assistant who works at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in New York City. Huste-Petersen and her husband launched the foundation in 2005 after their two sons, Eric and Jack, were diagnosed with autism. Early diagnosis and treatment helped produce significant improvements in both boys' conditions. Huste-Petersen wanted to reach out and help other parents and children facing the same obstacles. Her mission through the foundation is to raise money to create autism awareness and support programs and schools on Long Island that currently work with children on the autism spectrum. With the high prevalence of autism (one child out of every 110 births), many autism programs struggle to meet all of these children's needs. While autistic children must be in a 1:1 learning environment to progress, the government does not financially support that ratio, forcing these programs to rely on small non-profits such as EJ Autism for funding.

Events like the Jigsaw Run help to bring people together and raise much-needed money for the foundation. For Huste-Petersen, the idea of organizing a running event was a no-brainer.

"I've been running all my life, and at the time there were no other races around for autism, so the idea came quite naturally," said Huste-Petersen. "The fact that we had over 1,000 finishers despite the weather issues and having 11 other races taking place over the



The runners are seen here coming around the bend to head back up Bayview Avenue toward the finish line at the marina.

IB/Chalifoux

weekend across Long Island is amazing. It just showed how many people believe in us and I feel like the sun shone for us that morning.

"So many positives that come out of an event like this, and it's very moving to see everyone come together to support our cause, spread our message, and let other people know that autism is right here in our backyard."

Other upcoming events include Real-Aid, a non-competitive walking relay event on May 19 and 20 that will stretch all the way from East Islip to Montauk. The next event for autism is the Great South Bay Triathlon, which will also take place at the East Islip Marina on Sunday, June 3. Proceeds for the latter will benefit both EJ Autism and the Boomer Esiason Foundation for Cystic Fibrosis.

"We're a very fortunate organization, and we try to touch as many hearts as we can," said Huste-Petersen. "It's all about creating awareness and educating others about our struggle and with that comes compassion."

To view the race results, make a donation or learn more about the EJ Autism Foundation and its upcoming events, visit www.ejautismfoundation.org. ■