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## Rye's Olympic Village (</index.php/business-and-organizations/5888-rye-s-olympic-village>)

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By Lisa duBusc Miller

Every year, in late September, Rye becomes a veritable Olympic village. The weekend of September 23, athletes of all ages and strengths came out for the 34<sup>th</sup> Westchester Triathlon, which starts and ends at Rye Town Park.

There are so many heroes among the athletes and any number of awe-inspiring stories. The cause and the strong sense of community are what truly elevate this experience, year after year.

Phil Gormley, who chairs the event, is one of those heroes. He participated in that very first race in 1983 and has helped it grow in strength and numbers.

"I did it as a relay, and it was only a sprint, and it started at Lake Isle, in Eastchester," Gormley recalled. "A buddy and I were competing against each other in the half-mile swim, and there was a 15-mile bike up to White Plains High School, followed by a 5K run that finished up with a lap around the school track. I said afterwards that anyone who does all three of those things is out of their mind!"

Well, fast-forward 34 years, and Phil is certainly singing a very different tune. He got the tri-bug after a friend dared him to do his first full triathlon in the brisk waters of Burlington's Lake Champlain in 1989. And since then, Phil has done over 200, including 25 Westchester Triathlons. And he has spent the last 20 years volunteering for the Westchester Triathlon committee, not to mention chairing it for the better part of the last 15.

This year's event, led by race managers Jason Twedt and Molly Byrnes, drew 1,800 participants, supported by 500 volunteers, led by the extraordinary efforts of Jim McDonough, and raised over \$80,000 for six charities. (In the last 15 years, the Triathlon has raised over \$1 million.

It also provided countless community service hours to local students and funding for local teams and clubs. Gormley enthusiastically noted, "We even had the Rye High Cheerleading Club on top of Claire's Climb, thanks to Diana Vita of the Rye Y, and they really knocked it out of the park—it was incredible. They took the time to learn about Claire and really embraced it." The Rye TRI club has 180 members today and provides such outstanding training, as well as so many volunteers.

Clearly, the event has come a long way from that lap around the high school track.

Back in 2002, there was a risk of the event not being held, but Gormley approached Rye Y Executive Director Gregg Howells and pulled them aboard, along with the Leukemia & Lymphoma Society as the two anchor charities. Since then, more charities have been added, including Challenged Athletes Foundation, RWB Veterans, MAC Angels Foundation (aka Friends of Claire), and a local favorite, Soul Ryeders.

"We got involved last year in honor of a Rye mom, Kate Muldowney," said Sandy Samberg of Soul Ryeders. "Kate, diagnosed with cancer, was so appreciative of the special care she received from Mondays with Soul Ryeders, and when she passed away, her niece Kelly Vives and her mom Anne O'Brien, started Team Kate in 2016 to race in the triathlon while fundraising for us."

Those funds helped create a program called Soul Healing, which offers massage, Reiki, meditation, reflexology, and yoga to cancer patients and their caregivers. The Triathlon now raises funds that go directly toward Sole Healing. Samberg added, "Kate would be so happy and proud to know that so many are able to receive this kind of healing care that she loved so much at her time of need."

Denise Cypher, a key coach for Rye YMCA Tribe, along with Sally Braid, conducts triathlon training for women. As a longtime Westchester Tri participant and volunteer, she describes the race as a "fabulous community experience where you see the same faces every year, which demonstrates dedication to the race, but also new faces, indicating that the race is still growing."

She admitted, "This year, six to eight competed in a half-Ironman. So much of this is instigated by the fact that we have the Olympics right here in Rye."

The event pays tribute to Phil's late sister, Claire Gormley Collier, with Claire's Climb, a steep .4-mile ascent on the bike route that has its own timing, focus, and prizes. Claire's lesson of "every day is a present!" and her "don't give up!" motto continue to inspire. She sadly lost the fight to ALS in 2009 at age 46.

Those in need of a little inspiration and mind-body perspective while racing, don't need to look much further than the Challenged Athletes Foundation (CAF), which has been supported by the Westchester Triathlon for over 12 years. Doug Olson, Senior Development Director, Northeast Region, explains, "Support from the race helps provide adaptive sports clinics in everything from surfing to lacrosse to tennis to all — children, injured military veterans and first responders."

Olson continued, "It's all about getting back into the game, getting back to that starting line. The equipment needed is not usually covered by insurance, so we provide that funding and allow access to the sports these athletes love."

Among this year’s 20 CAF athletes was an 11-year-old boy who is a bilateral leg amputee. It was his third triathlon, his first open water swim, and his first Zoot Westchester Triathlon.

One of the CAF Ambassador athletes, Rudy Garcia-Tolson (NoLegsNoLimits), a double leg, above the knee, amputee, competed on Sunday. At the dinner the night before the race, he explained, “I was born with a birth defect on his legs, my fingers were webbed, and my parents did not want to cut my legs off. But after 15 operations, I told my parents that it was OK to cut my legs off because I wanted to be normal, and do what the other kids were doing.”

Soon after being fitted with prosthetics, Garcia-Tolson started playing soccer, walking home from school, and learning how to ride a bike. Then he became a four-time Paralympic athlete, and a gold and silver medalist.

On Playland Beach, Gormley reports, “Rudy pulled himself all the way down the beach to the waterfront and got in the water with everyone else—no special treatment. And that is the beauty of CAF, they get ‘em back in the game by giving them prosthetics and letting them race and be ambassadors.”

When not racing, Rudy teaches swimming to disabled and able-bodied athletes in Westchester and New York City.

Keiron McCammon, another CAF Ambassador athlete, and arm amputee, was paragliding in Colombia in 2006 hit power lines on his landing. He went from a pretty regular life to just surviving. Today Keiron’s motto is “I’ve gone from surviving to STRIVING.” Keiron has done several Westchester Triathlons, three Ironmen and climbed Mt. Kilimanjaro in 2016.

Sarah Reinertsen, another CAF athlete, and the first woman leg amputee to complete Ironman Kona in Hawaii with a prosthetic, traveled from California to attend this year’s Zoot Triathlon.

As a past Triathlon participant and as a swim course volunteer again this year, I feel compelled to add that I had the privilege of watching the first swimmers cut through the silent warm water at sunrise —as if it were glass. Then the cheering began, by swim angels and those on SUP’s and kayaks along the course. As the encouragement rose, so did the courage and confidence, radiating to the point that I almost expected fish to leap out of Long Island Sound, high on positive energy.

And that buddy of Phil’s who swam against him in Lake Isle in 1983? Well his name is Luke Dougherty and he was at this year’s race.

So was Cary Clark, another friend from the 1983 relay, who flew in from Colorado to participate, along with his 12-year-old daughter, Cassidy. Cassidy participated in the Kids Triathlon on Saturday, and then cheered Phil on beside the transition area on Sunday. She wore the Friends of Claire necklace that Phil had given her years before.

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