

Helping hands

Special gift for disabled athlete

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The first Sunday in November is five months off, but Michael Inglese already has a good idea how he will spend it. He will be up before dawn. He will be primed to complete his first New York City Marathon.

He will be in his new wheelchair, beginning a 26-mile journey on the Staten Island side of the Verrazano Bridge, filled with gratitude for the students and staff of Poly Prep, on the Brooklyn side.

"My heart goes out to all of them," Inglese said.

Inglese is 41 years old. He lives in a subsidized housing complex in upstate Kingston and has known not much but hardship. His mother died when he was a boy. His father all but abandoned him. He suffered a brain tumor at age 12, the complications leaving his legs crippled and his face disfigured. Inglese also has cerebral palsy.

He is not much for special ceremonies or public appearances, but Inglese made an exception last Tuesday when he rode down to Poly from Kingston with his friend and pastor, the Rev. Frank Wailner of Holy Cross Episcopal Church, and received the first standing ovation of his life.

It came in Poly Prep's Alumni Room, a stately parlor with royal blue walls and rich wooden trim. It came right after the kids from Poly presented him with the chair they'd spent six months raising funds for. Inglese entered his first marathon last November, going 20 miles before succumbing to the cold and to the fatigue brought on by an old chair. Now he was sitting in his new chair, smiling, offering a few heartfelt words. Then he went for a spin in the hallway.

"It feels really great that I could help someone out," said seventh-grader Reid Ross.

"It's the nicest thing I've ever been a part of," said Kathy Rienzi, the French teacher who spearheaded the fund-raising effort.

Then Rienzi turned to Zoe Koplowitz, and said, "It's all through Zoe that this happened."

Like Inglese, Koplowitz is a disabled athlete who competes for the Achilles Track Club. She suffers from multiple sclerosis. On her crutches, she has completed eight marathons, finishing last every time, forging on in dark-

ness and danger, with a spirit that refuses to flag even as her body does.

Koplowitz, owner of a moving company, has achieved a measure of fame. She has been profiled in newspapers, become a popular speaker, been featured on TV.

Shari Fogler, the parent-teacher liaison at Poly, lost her grandmother to MS. She was awestruck at Koplowitz' courage and further struck by her blue eyes — just like her grandmother's. Fogler invited her to speak.

Koplowitz accepted and so wowed the 640 students that they invited her back again. She talked to them about her "TV-set theory of life," about how we have 100 channels

aren't permitted to wear hats. For one day, for \$1, the rule was waived and students could wear whatever hat they wanted. Hat Day raised \$400.

Lori Redell, the head of admissions, presided over a gala bake sale. That was good for \$500 more. One of the customers was Reid Ross. "I just bought and ate stuff," he said.

Reid's mother, Vivian, who works for St. Mary's Hospital, had a contact with the Hygeia Medical Co. and got a considerable price break on a new Quiekie racing wheelchair.

Then there was the \$500 raised from the ticket to the Jackie Onassis auction that was donated by Nicole Buck,

chairman of the language department, and purchased by an anonymous staff member.

"The thing that's very significant is that it really involved everyone," said Rienzi.

The effort raised nearly \$2,500 in all. They got to present the chair to Inglese, to see his face aglow last week.

"I'm very glad we could give to him personally," said Diane Fogarty, a senior from Rockaway. "I think it was important to have that presentation — for him to know that somebody gave it to him, and for us to see how happy he was."

Fogarty will enroll in Duke this fall. She said she's grateful for this whole experience, and especially for meeting Koplowitz. Fogarty has cerebral palsy. She said she has felt Koplowitz' strength and been empowered by it.

"She's so upbeat about life," Fogarty said. "She's made me realize how much more I can do and how I can't worry about what anybody might think or say."

A little before 3 p.m. Tuesday, the Rev. Wailner pulled his Jeep to the front entrance of Poly Prep and folded Inglese's new chair in the back. On the return trip to Kingston, they spoke about the day and how beautiful kindness can be.

Inglese put 7 miles on his new chair the next day. He has no doubt he'll finish the marathon this year. He will have a five-person support team to help. They will take turns accompanying him, encouraging him.

"They went to all the trouble for the wheelchair, and now they want to come with me? That will be nice," Inglese said.



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POLY PREP students honor Michael Inglese (in wheelchair) and Zoe Koplowitz (with crutches).

full of possibility.

"If you don't like what you see, you just have to change the channel," Koplowitz said.

She spoke about the marathon being a metaphor for human struggle.

"We all reach a wall in life, a point where you have nothing left to give, and you still have to go on. When you move past that point in your personal or professional life, then your life changes forever," Koplowitz said.

The Poly students gave Koplowitz one standing ovation after another. There were too many hugs to count. The people at Poly Prep wanted to know what they could do for her.

Koplowitz consulted with Dick Traum, founder of Achilles. One of Traum's programs is called Endow A Chair, which seeks money to buy wheelchairs for disabled athletes. Koplowitz got back to Rienzi and Fogler, and the fund-raising began last fall.

Dorothy Donovan, chairman of the math department, came up with the idea for Hat Day. Poly students