

Big Town **Big Heart**

Achilles Kids brings sports to kids with disabilities



Volunteer Ryan Maloney has been spending time with children in the Achilles Kids workout program since 2008.

Athletes like Tyler, 21, who has run four NYC marathons, are among the success stories of Achilles Kids. The non-profit, created in 1995, helps low-income children (ages 4 to 24) with disabilities get fit, healthy, and confident in a supportive, structured, and encouraging environment. The twice-monthly workouts feature stretching, calisthenics, timed laps, strength building and mobility improving exercises, and running based games for members and their siblings. Tyler, who has autism, became a member of Achilles Kids at age seven. "Achilles Kids was the only program that understood Tyler's needs," says Tyler's mom, Nadine. "Nowadays he's an athlete with autism. Autism has become secondary." Tyler currently holds the state title in swimming the backstroke for the Special Olympics.

Achilles Kids also provides athletic and recreational opportunities for 4,000 low-income children with disabilities in 150 public schools in New York.

"We serve primarily a low-income minority population that has few resources and limited access to specialized

services and adaptive spaces. The children have cognitive and physical disabilities including Down's syndrome, autism, ADHD, cerebral palsy, spina bifida, muscular dystrophy, traumatic brain injuries, and orthopedic disorders," explains the program director and founder, Karen Lewis.

"Over time, we have seen amazing improvements in the behavior of many Achilles Kids' participants. We have seen children locked in their own worlds slowly become more alert and aware. They are able to run further and faster but also are able to wait in line, cheer for their teammates, and follow directions. The joy on their faces, the enthusiasm with which they greet their friends, the sparks of recognition when working with favorite volunteers all speak to the amazing impact the program has on their lives," Lewis adds.

"This is my life's passion. I can't imagine doing anything else," says Lewis.

As always, volunteers are key to the success of the program. Janet Patton, who has led the Achilles Kids weekend program since 2007 (while working full-time for

the organization), credits volunteer Ryan Maloney as making a difference. "He's the kind of person who plans his trips around his schedule as a volunteer," says Patton.

"I googled volunteer on the web, got in touch with the Achilles Kids office and they told me to come to an Achilles Kids weekend workout at Jewish Community Center. I showed up there at 9:45 a.m. on a Saturday and it was a blast! I asked when I could come back," he recalls.

That was in 2008 and Maloney has been showing up ever since. For the two-hour session, anywhere from 10 to 30 kids show up. The ratio of kids to volunteers is usually one to one along with two to three staff members.

"You are engaged the entire time," he says.

"When I first showed up, I did not have many expectations. But as I kept going, this one girl put her hands up and screamed my name. She is now in high school and I've become very close to her and her family. I've watched these kids grow up and I've developed significant relationships with many of them."

"I catch myself at certain moments and

say, 'Wow, this is great.' You get caught up in the energy. For example, you see a child walking with a metal walker and realize that this kid is physically laboring but as happy as they can possibly be. It's a real refresher and reminder for being grateful for the things you have."

Patton agrees. "These families have become my family. Seeing these children on Saturdays is so wonderful. They adapt to everything around them and they are so positive. Any problems you think you may be having, when you are with these kids, they all seem to go away."

Maloney adds, "Janet's contagious energy keeps us going. She makes all our events magical."

For more information, call (212) 354-0300 or visit www.achillesinternational.org.

— Holly Reich

About Big Town **Big Heart**

Big Town Big Heart is a series of articles showcasing organizations and volunteers who make a difference.