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Silent Running



Vic DeLucia for The New York Times

By COREY KILGANNON Published: June 3, 2007

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BEFORE a 5-kilometer race here last weekend, a pair of 16-year-old identical twins limbered up among several hundred other runners, looking, at first glance, perfectly ordinary.

They had slim builds, sinewy legs and lean faces. Their tank tops bore their race numbers: 46 for Alex Schneider, 47 for his brother Jamie.

But closer up, one could see they were different from the runners around them. They did not speak, even when spoken to. They stared into the distance and were clingy with their parents, Alan and Robyn Schneider. Each twin wore a bracelet identifying him as having nonverbal autism and listing contact information.

They pranced distractedly on the lawn like colts, impatient to run. But by the time the competitors left the starting line on South Oyster Bay Road, both boys stared intently ahead and moved quickly — each with a running coach at his side — toward the head of the

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pack.

“They can focus like a laser beam,” Mr. Schneider said. “They just get in a zone from the minute they wake up on a race day.”

That zone can distress the parents of autistic children. It can keep the children prisoners of their inner world and keep everyone else out. But if applied, it can become a tool, the way some of us use anger or charm or obsession to pursue our goals.

The Schneiders were desperate for some activity for their boys to focus on — one that would bring crucial interaction with nonautistic children and allow a physical outlet for their boundless energy.

The boys would often run speedy circles in the gym of their school, the Genesis School in Plainview, founded in 1995 by a group of parents with autistic children. A school official mentioned the Rolling Thunder Special Needs Program, which helps physically and mentally challenged athletes on Long Island compete in mainstream races.

In the regular weekend races and practices, the Schneiders found focus and interaction and energy release for Alex and Jamie.

They also learned that the boys were gifted runners. Alex is beginning to challenge the best of his age group, finishing 25th out of 370 runners in February at the Snowflake four-miler in Long Beach and recently running a 10K race (6.2 miles) in 43 minutes. He beat 85 people last month to win a 5K (3.1 miles) in Great Neck.

Officials at Great Neck South High School have agreed to allow the twins to practice and compete with its varsity team come September, the Schneiders said.

Because the boys cannot follow a race course alone, each must run with a guide. But they have trouble finding guides who are fast enough. Shanthy Hughes, 39, of Floral Park, runs with Jamie. Kevin McDermott, 48, of East Islip, runs with Alex. The guides' availability is limited, so the boys run only once a week.

At the end of each race, Alex keeps running, and Mr. McDermott has to corral him.

“He’s a running machine,” Mr. McDermott said. “He’s come so far with minimal practice, and he drops 15 seconds each race. We don’t want to push him, so we really don’t know how fast he can really go yet. We’re holding him back because he doesn’t understand pacing. He goes out too fast the first mile, because he doesn’t know when the race is going to end.”

The brothers have always excelled at certain things, including being able to quickly and methodically assemble 500-piece puzzles from the bottom up, left to right. But now, running has taken over.

“Alex races through his dinner, he races up and down the stairs,” Mrs. Schneider said. “You can’t tell them about the race the day before because they get so excited they won’t sleep. You have to tell them that morning. Then they take their sneakers and the clothing in their gym bags and line it all up.”

After they leave school at age 20, the twins will most likely live in a group home and work. “They already have jobs that make use of their compulsiveness,” Mrs. Schneider said. “They work at T. J. Maxx, unpacking boxes of merchandise and organizing it, and at an office, opening and collating mail.”

Like Alex and Jamie, their parents are also racing: in their case to prepare the boys to survive when they can no longer parent them. Running in the real world, the Schneiders hope, will teach their sons about the rewards of discipline and hard work and push them toward more independent mainstream ventures.

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After last weekend's race, other runners sprawled in exhaustion, but the Schneider twins still pranced around restlessly.

Alex had finished 86th out of nearly 400 runners, completing the five kilometers in 20 minutes 53 seconds, including a 6:30 first mile. Jamie ran the race in 27:46.

Steve Cuomo, 54, of Shirley, head coach and president of the Rolling Thunder group, came by and hugged them.

"We don't know what kids like this can do because we've never trained them," he said.

"One thing I teach them is: Never quit. They're going to survive out there in the real world."

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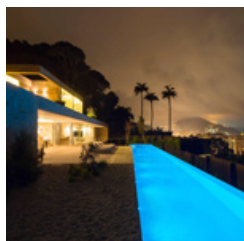


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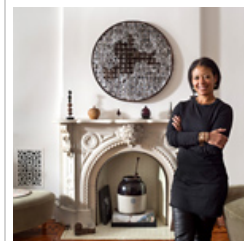
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