

Long Island Now

Autistic Boston Marathon runner from Great Neck ensures safety with personal best

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Had Alex Schneider run Monday's Boston Marathon at the same pace he did two years ago, the last time he competed in it, the 22-year-old Great Neck resident would have crossed the finish line at 4:09:10 -- 33 seconds before the first of two bombs exploded.

Instead, Schneider ran one of the best races of his life, exactly tying his personal best of 3:23:22. Schneider's speed was among several factors that may have spared him, his coaches and their families from harm's way.

Schneider has autism and runs with two guides -- Kevin McDermott, of East Islip, and Stephen Dalton, of Floral Park. His mother, Robyn, 56, was sitting with Dalton's pregnant wife and kids in the first row of the grandstand -- located directly across the street from where the explosions took place.

After she watched her son cross the finish line, Robyn Schneider reunited with him in the family meeting area.

Usually, they would return immediately to their seats to watch her husband, Allan, 60, cross the finish line with Alex's twin brother, Jamie, but Robyn Schneider noticed that Alex forgot to pick up his medal. She spent an extra 10 minutes speaking with a race volunteer to obtain medals for her son and his coaches. Then, she noticed Alex was shivering, so she brought him back to their hotel to change clothes.

"If it was warmer out, we would've gone straight back to the grandstands," she said.

Robyn and Alex Schneider were just about to leave their room on the 24th floor of the Westin Copley Place, which overlooks the finish line, when the first explosion took place.

She thought it was a celebratory cannon at first, but when she heard the second boom, she looked out her window.

"We saw the smoke ... people running and we heard really loud sirens," she recalled.

Allan and Jamie Schneider didn't hear the explosion, nor did they see the smoke. They had just conquered "Heartbreak Hill" with Jamie's other guide, Katie Reed, and were approaching the 22-

mile mark, when suddenly police on motorcycles sped past them. As they turned a corner, another group of officers jumped in front of them and told everyone to stop.

Allan Schneider pulled out his cellphone, but he couldn't send or receive any messages. Then news started to filter in from the crowd of halted runners that a bomb went off at the finish line and people had died.

"I knew Robyn was directly in the front row of the bleachers. She always manages to get there," he said, recalling a panic that set in.

About an hour later, he received a text from his wife letting him know that she, Alex and the rest of their group were okay.

Meanwhile, Jamie, who is also severely autistic, was getting upset by the sobbing runners around him. He became even more emotional when they were escorted, along with 300 other runners, to a nearby church, where they remained under lockdown until 7 p.m. There, aids provided blankets, water and hot food, but at one point, Allan Schneider said, police started calling out names.

"I had this ominous feeling that they were looking for relatives of the injured," he said. "Jamie was really starting to get traumatized at this time."

Allan Schneider and his son were finally bused back to Copley Square, about a mile from the finish line. After passing through several police checkpoints, they were reunited with their family at the hotel.

"We were grateful ... but our hearts go out to everyone who lost family members," Robyn Schneider said.

Although shaken by the experience, the family doesn't plan to stop running marathons.

"The boys love it too much," she said. "We can't stop living our lives."

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