

A Family Faces Autism 26.2 Miles At A Time

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There have been many challenges for Robyn and Allan Schneider to face since their severely autistic identical 23-year-old twin sons, Alex and Jamie, were diagnosed when they were less than two years old.

The next challenge for the boys, who received national media attention on TV, in print and on the Internet in November for their participation in the New York City Marathon, is in returning to Boston to race again on April 21.

The Schneiders, who live in Great Neck and have been married for almost 30 years, still have vivid memories of their experience last year during the Boston Marathon bombing when a painful 90 minutes passed before they knew not only where each other was, but whether or not both of the boys were safe.

"It's a delicate condition I find myself in," said Allan, who is about to run alongside Jamie in a marathon for the seventh time, three of them in Boston. "On one hand, certain people might say you shouldn't take him back to a bad experience. Other people say you have to get him over it. I find that



being a father, I have to try things. I don't push him, but I just have to make the effort to try. Otherwise, he would never do anything or try anything."

"I think we can accomplish it," he continued. "If I think it's going to be too upsetting for him, I'll pull him out."

"Jamie loves people," added Robyn. "He often stops along the way to shake hands. He loves being in social situations. We want him to experience the

happiness of the Boston Marathon. Alex is an amazingly gifted runner. He loves to race. He's so competitive."

Alex, accompanied by several coaches, ran the 26 miles in Boston last year in 3:23.22, meeting his mother at the finish line about 45 minutes before the explosions.

Meanwhile, Jamie, running at his usual leisurely pace, was still out on the course with his father.

Allan described what happened at the moment he realized that something was wrong.

"We had four or five thousand people around us, and we were four miles from the finish line," he said. "All of a sudden motorcycle policemen were zooming in between us and around us. We didn't know what it was. Up ahead you could see hundreds of people stopped in a huge logjam."

It was cold and windy that day, but the runners were dressed in only T-shirts and shorts. Keeping warm became a problem even after many runners, including Jamie and his father, were sheltered in a church. Allan couldn't reach his wife on his cell phone for almost 90 minutes, but he did begin to receive texts from relatives out west, giving him some idea of the seriousness of what had happened.

Meanwhile, the cold weather played a direct role, ironically, in placing Alex and his mother in a safe place — their hotel room.

"Alex always goes back to the finish line because he enjoys watching all the other runners come in," she said. "But this time, because it was so chilly, I brought him back to the hotel to grab a sweatshirt. I had my hand on the doorknob to go back to the race when the first explosion went off."

In the church, conditions were chaotic.

Ready To Return to Boston: Allan Schneider (l), his son Jamie, his wife Robyn and Jamie's twin brother, Alex, are set to run in the Boston Marathon on April 21. (Photo by Andy Newman)

"I couldn't explain to Jamie what was going on," his father said, relating how difficult it was to keep his son calm during the three to four hours they were there. "He was bewildered by all of it."

As they consider the future for their sons, Robyn and Allan are exploring many options. They are both serious advocates for autism support, research and consciousness, pointing out that their return to Boston comes during National Autism Awareness Month, and that World Autism Day was observed on April 2.

The Schneiders' goal for their sons is to be able to eventually live close by on their own with proper support resources.

"Alex and Jamie have always lived in Great Neck," said Robyn. "This is their town. This is their place. We take advantage of all of the amenities of Great Neck. We walk to town all the time. We walk to the park and we walk to Parkwood. We want them to stay in Great Neck. It's very important to us."

"The notion of being close to a downtown is very important for people with developmental disabilities," she added. "It's important not to be secluded in a place where you can't go anywhere unless you get into a car."

Alex and Jamie regularly attend a Day Habilitation Program in East Meadow at The Genesis School, part of the Eden II program, and also run at least three times a week in Bethpage. Their program features classes that foster independence, community inclusion and volunteer work.