

After a decade, Potomac autism race organizer will lace up

■ Fourth of July 5K has raised \$1.5 million in 10 years

BY SARA GATES
SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE

For nine years, Potomac resident Susan Pereles stood on the sidelines of the Autism Speaks race she organized. She waited patiently at the finish line as runners completed the 5K course. She congratulated participants and tracked the top runners' times.

On Sunday, the 10th anniversary of the Autism Speaks 5K run/1 mile walk, Pereles will join hundreds of parents and community members who have been touched by autism and finally cross the finish line.

"Usually as race director, I run a lot all over the place," Pereles said. "I'm always at the finish line with the tape. It just never occurred to me that [participating] would be something I could do."

Pereles organized the race in 2001 in support of her nephew, Shant Ayanian, now 12, who was diagnosed with autism. She contacted Cure Autism Now — which merged with Autism Speaks in 2007 — and offered to direct the race. Pereles, who was hired by Autism Speaks in 2008, has also recruited many families to the fold.

Jay Kerness of Potomac is known to Pereles as head of the dad's committee. Kerness, several other dads and a few sons put up signs around the course directing runners, and help clean-up after the event.

Kerness is the captain of Team Jack, in honor of his 11-year-old son.

"All of his success over the years is due really to the support of his friends, and community," Kerness said. "It's a pretty cool feeling having everybody together and gathering in the library parking lot to see the whole community

together."

Kerness expects a larger turnout this year since July 4 falls on a Sunday. Pereles said more than 2,000 people attended in 2008 when the race was on a Friday, but attendance was slightly down last year because of the scheduling overlap with swim meets.

The event has raised \$1.5 million over the past decade. Pereles said she expects to raise more money this year than in previous years, likely because of the increased sponsorship by local businesses. As of Tuesday morning, donations totaled \$132,889.

"We're probably 25 percent higher," Pereles said in comparison to previous years. "It may be that the economy is not great, but autism doesn't take a break."

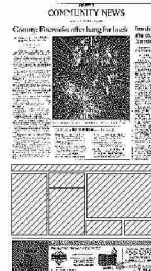
Stephen Kirstein, who has contributed \$5,780 to date, is the principal of the construction and design firm **BOWA**, this year's sponsor.

"This year Susan approached me to be the principal sponsor. For us, it was a natural fit," Kirstein of Bethesda said of his family's involvement. "It's something we've supported for the last 10 years," he said.

Kirstein, whose 12-year-old son, Richard has autism, was recently appointed to National Chapter Capital Board for Autism Speaks.

Pereles said that 90 percent of the donations go to Autism Speaks, which uses the money for national autism research, awareness, advocacy and family services such as a 100-day packet, or road map, which is sent to parents of newly diagnosed children. Ten percent of the total donations constitute administrative fees for the event's preparation.

Online registration closes at midnight. For dates and locations of late registration and packet pick-up check out the event's website, events.autismspeaks.org/autismspeaks5k.





ANTHONY CASTELLANO/THE GAZETTE

Iryna Kruta (left) and Semi Nasseri prepare more than 2,000 shirts for the Autism Speaks 5K. The event has raised \$1.5 million over the past decade.