

banter

# OFF AND RUNNING

*How Susan Pereles turned the Autism Speaks 5K into a huge success*

BY JOE ZIMMERMANN

## THE FIRST TIME SUSAN PERELES

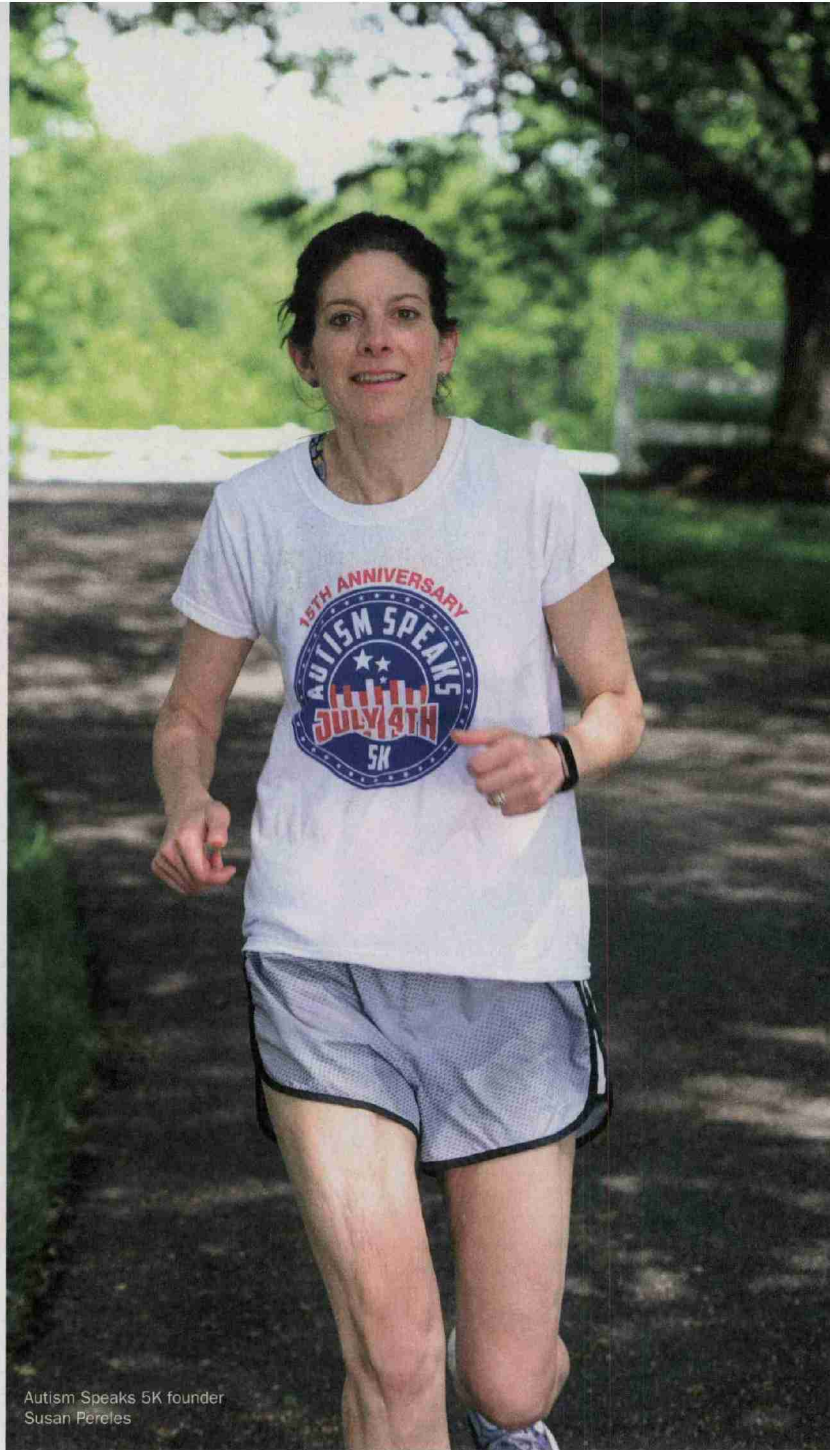
organized a 5K, she expected to lose money. She had heard that charity races often take years to get off the ground, and that the first year is more about establishing a base of donors and supporters than raising money.

But Pereles, a Potomac resident with a background in nursing, didn't let that discourage her. Her nephew Shant Ayanian had been diagnosed with autism in 2000, and she was determined to do something to help raise awareness and money for the developmental disorder.

In the fall of 2000, she set out to find people who might be able to contribute, starting with neighbors and friends, and later promoting the event through advertising in local media. She also recruited other organizations to help, including advocacy groups and running associations, such as the Montgomery County Road Runners Club.

Pereles' work paid off. In 2001, the first year of the race, more than 700 people participated and raised nearly \$100,000 for Cure Autism Now, a national advocacy organization that funded awareness campaigns and research and eventually merged with Autism Speaks.

Now, as Pereles prepares for its 16th running, the 5K has become a yearly affair in Potomac, involving thousands



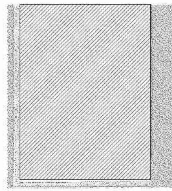
Autism Speaks 5K founder Susan Pereles

of runners and raising hundreds of thousands of dollars every July 4. Last year, in bad weather, the race drew 1,553 participants and raised \$255,000.

"I think I'm making a difference not only for my family but for so many

families that are struggling," says Pereles, 52, who ended up joining Autism Speaks in 2008 and now works as the organization's director of field development. In addition to raising funds for research, the Autism Speaks 5K brings

PHOTO BY MICHAEL VENTURA



the local autism community together to support each other, Pereles says.

Ten years ago, many people who had a family member on the spectrum wouldn't necessarily tell their friends or co-workers, Pereles says. It was a private ordeal, and although some of that is changing today, the stigma remains. "This particular group of people really needs community support," says Wendy Kuhn, a Bethesda resident who worked with Montgomery County Public Schools to add three classrooms for children with autism at Carderock Springs Elementary School. "Susan is really good at tapping into so many facets of the community to bring that support together."

Steve Kirstein of Potomac became involved in the event shortly after his son, Richard, was diagnosed with autism when he was 18 months old. A principal at the construction firm **BOWA**, Kirstein has recruited many of his co-workers to participate, and the company has served as a presenting sponsor for the last four years, donating \$10,000 each year.

What started as a local fundraiser has become one of the largest charity events of its kind, so popular that it's "hard to get to the starting line because it's so packed," Pereles says.

The field of runners in Potomac on race day doesn't even represent all of the people involved. Others participate around the world, either running or walking wherever they are, or helping to raise money in the months leading up to the event.

Kirstein's family usually travels to Dewey Beach for the Fourth of July, and in recent years they've started a tradition of organizing a July 4 run on the beach. Last year, more than 50 friends and family members joined them. Says Kirstein: "It's really a central event every summer for our family." ■