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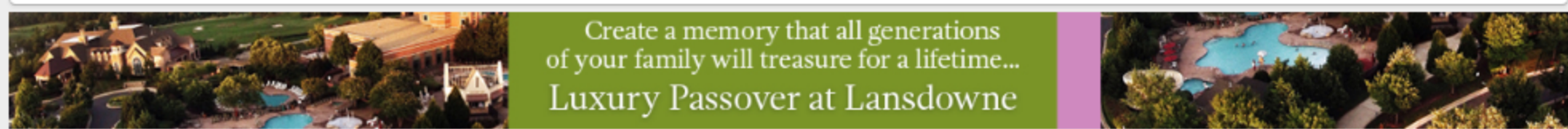


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FRIENDSHIP CIRCLE MARATHON IN MIAMI

WRITTEN BY NATASHA NADEL ON 16 FEBRUARY 2017. POSTED IN FEATURES

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Friendship Circle is an international organization that provides fun, friendship and Jewish community for children with special needs. A few weeks ago, 225 participants in the Friendship Circle's marathon and half marathon in Miami raised over half a million dollars for Friendship Circle programming in their communities. For many Kol HaBiraH readers, this event benefited your friends and neighbors, maybe even your family. For me, now returned from my second year of walking the half marathon for Friendship Circle of Maryland, I am more certain than ever that this will truly be an annual event in my life.

Over \$67,000 was raised for our local Maryland chapter alone, an affiliate of Chabad Lubavitch of Maryland directed by Rabbi Mendel and Chana Kaplan. In fact, out of all the teams around the country, Maryland ranked third in fundraising and was only behind the much larger teams of Miami-Dade (FL) and Brooklyn.

The 20 Maryland Team participants included several types of duos: mother and daughter; husband and wife; grandmother and grandson; and grandmother and mom of a Friendship Circle member with special needs.

Several George Washington University students joined Team Maryland,

including Carly Meisel, co-founder and director of marketing for Brooklyn Sandwich Co., a glatt kosher food truck in Washington, D.C. Bethesda cookbook author Paula Shoyer and I rounded out the foodie portion of the team analyzing each of the numerous and plentiful gourmet meals served at our hotel on Miami's Biscayne Bay.

The mom of a Central New Jersey Friendship Circle participant opened the weekend with a profound statement. "This organization does Hashem's work around the country," she said, describing it as "the embodiment of acceptance and love in our community, which every person deserves."

Her son Zachary's birthday was the same day of the marathon. "Let him inspire you to take every step Sunday, for each step we were told he was not going to take," she said.

Friendship Circle provided an inspirational Shabbat, full of speakers who talked about life before and after their family's participation in Friendship Circle, and the difference that support has made to every member of their family, not only the child with special needs.



The most powerful moment of the weekend occurred during the pre-race banquet after Shabbat. We watched a short film, "Olivia's Cycle," about a New Jersey girl's mitzvah project that provided bicycles for children with special needs, specifically made for each of their abilities, complete with a license plate with their name imprinted on it. She paired her event with the send-off of three cyclists who rode across the country to raise money for Friendship Circle.

Joseph Volfman, a young man who has cerebral palsy, received his first bicycle and experienced his first bicycle ride thanks to the Friendship Circle event. In the film, he tells the camera, "I felt the wind blowing on my face and I felt like everyone else. It was one of the best things that I ever experienced in my life."

His mom also said that the specialized bicycle was strengthening his leg muscles. "It changed our life completely," she said.

When the movie was over, a confident 17-year-old rolled his wheelchair to the front of the stage, took the microphone and said, "My name is Joe Volfman."

"Yes, the same Joe from five years ago that you just watched on the video screen."

The audience was stunned. Talk about making an entrance— and clearly showing the transformative effect that Friendship Circle can have on program participants.

"My disability doesn't stop me from doing what I love in any way, shape or form," Volfman said. "I currently compete in track, field, archery, swimming, power lifting, cycling and mono skiing AND, I am a Paralympics hopeful in 2020. I have no boundaries, I set no limits, and I make sure to always shatter stereotypes. Without you, without the Friendship Circle, I wouldn't be where I am today."

"Tomorrow, my story will come to a complete circle," he continued. "The Friendship Circle not only gave me a comfortable and awesome bike, but they also provided me with the sense of freedom and independence that changed my life forever."

"Tomorrow, when you can't run anymore, or you are tired— it may be hard, it may be painful, but you must realize what you're running for, who you're running for, and why. It's to make sure kids with disabilities have equal opportunities, and together we can prove what we are made of and how we roll...LET'S DO THIS!"

Volfman used a hand-pedaled bike to complete the half-marathon on Sunday. After the race, he wrote in an e-mail, "I never thought I'd be able to accomplish what I did and so this goes to show that nothing is impossible. I'm going to continue training hard and hopefully cycle in the Paralympics in 2020."

"The people who did the Miami marathon are true inspirations," he wrote, "and I would not be able to be where I am if people didn't do what they did in the marathon. Each and every person persevered and overcame their struggles. That's why I ride."

The race began in the dark, early Sunday morning. Despite the pouring rain, we were prepared: physically from months of training, and mentally from the whole weekend of moving and motivating programming.

Mother and daughter duo Marcelle and Noemi Garih wore Team Friendship jerseys with "Team Solika" on the back. Solika is Noemi's daughter, and her Friendship Circle friend happens to be the daughter of Team Maryland captain Dana Ginsburg of Potomac.

Noemi said that through the cold and rain during the race, "My biggest inspiration was picturing Solika and remembering how long and hard she worked to be able to take her first step and the look of pride on her face when she finally did."

One tangential benefit of Friendship Circle activities is the respite it provides to parents of children with special needs. In addition, Noemi said, "I look forward to Sundays when Solika either has Torah Circle or Birthday Club. Her sister is constantly invited to birthday parties, and so it gives Solika a chance to also have an activity."

For many participants, Friendship Circle is the only source of their Jewish education outside the home. "Solika learns so much from FC," Noemi said. "Since she goes to public school, we love to be able to send her to Jewish activities so that she can learn and enhance her Jewish upbringing. It warms my heart every time she washes her hands and starts to recite *al netilat yadayim*."

Numerous members of the Maryland team hosted fundraisers from Silver Spring to Gaithersburg. Ginsburg said that building the team as team captain the past two years has helped build awareness of Friendship Circle in the community, leading more families to become involved and more teens to volunteer to work with participants.

"I'm so happy to be involved in an organization that strives to make the community a more accepting place for all regardless of our differences and abilities," said Ginsburg.

Several local businesses and online retailers participated in fundraisers for Team Maryland. These included: Ben Yehuda Pizza, Cafe Shawreen, Krispy Kreme, Sunflower Bakery, Max's Kosher Café, Zengo Cycle, Five Below, LuLaRoe, Kosher Casual, Stella & Dot and Road Runner Sports, together with Shalom Kosher and Moti's Market bake sale donations.

Around 250 teens currently volunteer for the Friendship Circle of Maryland, serving approximately 100 participant families. To learn more, go to www.fc.md.org.

Natasha Nadel is a mom, journalist and author of "The Healthy Mama's Guide to Feeding Your Family Well – Simply and Sanely!" and "The Healthy Family, Healthy You Cookbook." She has contributed to over 20 national and regional newspapers, magazines, and blogs, including The Washington Post's "On Faith and On Parenting," Lilit, JTA, Na'amat Woman, The Jewish Press, Jewish Food Experience and Kveller.com.

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