

Strongman Challenge honors LaViola's legacy

BY JASON COHEN
OF NORTHERN VALLEY PRESS
OLD TAPPAN

In life, death does not discriminate – whether black, white, old or young, it takes people too often. One of those people is Michael LaViola of Old Tappan, who died Feb. 2, 2008, from synovial sarcoma at the age of 17.

Since his death, his family has worked hard to honor his memory by raising money for research through the Michael LaViola Foundation, a non-profit 501(c)(3), and in conjunction with the Varsity House Gym in Old Tappan, they held their fifth annual Strongman Challenge on June 1.

"It makes his name and memory live on," said his father Michael LaViola, who's well known both in Old Tappan and as a captain of the Alpine Police Department.

Michael was a one of a kind person and was also well known throughout the Old Tappan community. He was a football player with a heart of gold that always seemed to put others before himself. He loved his car, friends, family and was also

young people look forward to," LaViola said.

The challenge consists of three groups: eighth and ninth graders, high schoolers and college/professional athletes. The athletes compete in astounding events showcasing their strength, like the overhead press, tractor tire flip, death medley and the truck pull. It costs \$25 a person, and there are raffles and prizes and all of the money raised goes towards the Michael LaViola Foundation.

Sponsors of the event include: Valley Tent, Butterworth's Bagels, Baviellos Italian Deli, Mario's Pizza, Wine and Whiskey Barrel, Isabella's Fine Foods and ShopRite of Montvale.

This year's fund-raiser was a blast, LaViola said. Being able to see all of Michael's old friends and people in the community is really heartwarming,

he said.

LaViola said next year he plans to add a poker night to the festivities. The proceeds raised go to the National Institute of Health in Bethesda, Md. for research and allow the foundation to fund two \$1,500 students scholarships at Northern Valley Old Tappan in Michael's honor: one awarded to a four-year football player and another

er for a student pursuing a profession in the medical field.

Trevor Lang, the director of multimedia design at the Varsity House Gym, said it's really a fun filled competitive event. Seeing many of the kids that train at their facility come out to support such an

amazing cause shows how strong the community is, he said.

"[Michael LaViola] was a great example of what an athlete should be and we're happy to continue training athletes that can follow in his legacy," Lang said.

Photos by Murray Bass



This strongman hoists a heavy axle in the overhead press.



The LaViola family – from left, Mary, Katie and Michael – holding a fifth annual Strongman Challenge T-shirt.



The competition is underway. The Strongman Competition pits athletes in events that showcase astounding physical strength, all for a great cause.

a volunteer firefighter.

When he was diagnosed with terminal cancer during his senior year of high school, he continued to fight and lived by the motto "never, never give up." He bled red and blue and unfortunately passed away the day before the N.Y. Giants won the Super Bowl in 2008.

Synovial sarcoma is a rare form of cancer, and it has not been a priority for major research grants. The LaViola Foundation to date has raised over \$25,000 to fund research to cure the disease. To donate go to www.michaellaviolafoundation.org.

LaViola and many of his teammates in high school trained at the Varsity House Gym with owner Joe Riggio. Shortly after his death, Riggio approached Michael LaViola Sr. about holding an event in his son's honor. Consequently, for the past five years, they have held the strongman competition at the gym where hundreds of people come out to support the cause.

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