

November 10, 2008

American hero feted by event, fundraiser

JENNIFER BRADSHAW
KEYPORT BUREAU

The community surrounding the Zilinski family stretches wider than their native Monmouth County.

It reaches all the way to the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. It flows through Christian Brothers Academy in the Lincroft section of Middletown, to McGuire Air Force Base and on to Virginia. It even stretches to some stationed in the desert sands of Iraq and back again.

All of these places are linked by the name of Army Lt. Dennis W. Zilinski II, a friend, classmate and fellow serviceman whose influence and ties stretch to many people.

Zilinski, an accomplished swimmer, 2000 graduate of CBA and 2004 graduate of West Point, was killed Nov. 19, 2005, at age 23 in a roadside bombing near Bayji, 155 miles north of Baghdad.

Assigned to the 1st Battalion, 187th Infantry Regiment, 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault) "Rakkasan," Zilinski was deployed to Iraq with the 101st on Sept. 17, 2005. His many medals included the Combat Infantry Badge, Bronze Star, Purple Heart, Global War on Terror, Iraq Campaign Service Medal and the New Jersey Distinguished Service Medal.

Since his death, his family and friends have come together annually for the past three years to "Run with Dennis," a memorial 3.5-mile run and two-mile walk that drew about 506 runners and 437 walkers to PNC Bank Arts Center on Sunday.

Awards were given to the top three male and top three female runners. The top finishers were Matt Pelletier, 29, of Warwick, R.I., with a time of 15:43, and Jennifer Gunn, 44, of Aberdeen, with a time of 21:46.

Karen Connors, chairwoman for the event's committee, whose children grew up with Zilinski, said that last year's run and walk raised close to \$100,000, and she estimated that around \$80,000 was raised this year.

Proceeds from the event are used to support programs for injured soldiers, as well as to provide scholarships to CBA students.

Connors said more runners participated in Sunday's event than last year's.

"It shows that more people are taking the challenge," she said.

Starting around 10 a.m., participants of all ages ran and walked in groups, with their dogs, pushing strollers and by themselves, crossing the finish line while the Rock and Roll Chorus, a group of high school students, sang popular songs.

Later, while Carrabba's Italian Grill of Middletown, a major sponsor, served up an early lunch, the chorus serenaded the crowd with an a cappella version of Bruce Springsteen's "Born to Run," a request from Zilinski's family.

Army Capt. Dan Downs, 28, of New Mexico, currently stationed in Charlottesville, Va., made a special trip to New Jersey to run in the event for the first time.

A former swim team member with Zilinski at West Point, Downs was still recovering from gunshot wounds he received in Iraq during the first year of the event, so he did it in his wheelchair.

The second year, Downs was able to walk the route, and this year, he ran it, crossing the finish line

with Zilinski's father, Dennis, and brother Matthew.

Zilinski's mother, Marion, stood at the finish line, loudly cheering the participants as they passed. The West Point swim team crossed the line en masse, with one of the members holding a flag that waved behind them as they ran. Also on hand were 125 CBA students who volunteered to help run the event. Family and friends of the Zilinskis' seemed to be everywhere.

"I see a lot of new faces, but there are a lot of old faces too," Downs said, surveying the crowd.

One of the old faces belonged to Master Sgt. Bubba Beason, who ran the 3.5-mile stretch wearing a 35-pound tactical vest.

Last year, Beason said, he ran with another serviceman, both of them wearing backpacks. Now his running partner is "over in the sand," he said, but Beason came back to honor a fellow serviceman, bringing with him some people from McGuire Air Force Base, where he is currently stationed.

"It's the right thing to do. It's why I am here," Beason said.
