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Pushing past pain to honor a lost soldier

Fallen officer's wounded pal goes the extra mile in Holmdel memorial run

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BY MARYANN SPOTO

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When Marion Zilinski heard her son's buddy planned to jog in a memorial run yesterday, she cautioned the Iraq War veteran against the idea.

But Capt. Dan Downs, still recovering from a severe gunshot wound, wouldn't be dissuaded. Two years ago, friends pushed him through the course in a wheelchair. Last year, he walked the two miles. So, as a personal challenge and a tribute to his friend, Downs wanted to run this year.

For Downs, a 28-year-old Army captain from Virginia, the third annual Lt. Dennis W. Zilinski II Memorial Run yesterday was not only a physical triumph, but also an emotional one.

"The mother in me wants him not to, because I don't want him to get hurt," Zilinski said two days before the run that pays tribute to her 23-year-old son, who was killed in Iraq on Nov. 19, 2005. "But then again, the mother in me knows he needs to do this for himself to honor his friend. That makes the mother in me so proud of him."

Downs said there was no question he'd run this year, two years after being shot in the lower left leg. The Zilinskis had become like his second family. He and Dennis, though two years apart at West Point, swam on the same team and Downs, then living in New Mexico, spent Thanksgivings at the Zilinski home.

"The point is, it's a run to honor Dennis. Dennis was an athlete. I'm an athlete. Athletes don't stop. They like pushing themselves, pushing their bodies," said Downs, now an Army ROTC instructor at the University of Virginia.

The run, held at the PNC Bank Arts Center in Holmdel, is a primary source of income for the Lt. Dennis W. Zilinski II Foundation established by the family to help wounded veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan. So far, the foundation has doled out about half of the \$200,000 it has raised to individuals and to programs helping soldiers adapt to their new lives.

Marion Zilinski remembered being impressed by Underwater Warriors, a program that teaches amputees to scuba dive. When she reached out to the coordinator, she discovered the program was successful in its mission but struggling financially.

"Maybe someday I can help," Zilinski told the coordinator last year, without letting on she planned to make a sizable donation.

For two years in a row, the foundation's contributions have kept the program afloat while staffers seek federal funding, Zilinski said.

Earlier this year, the Zilinskis learned of a soldier from Howell who lost both legs to an improvised explosive device in Iraq. The foundation paid the cost of renovating his bathroom to accommodate his disability.

"It's touched a nerve," said Karen Connors, chairwoman of the run. "People really see there's so much good that can come out of something so tragic."

The foundation also distributes two scholarships annually for Christian Brothers Academy in the Lincroft section of Middletown, the alma mater of Dennis and his younger brother, Matthew, who has followed in his footsteps.

Matthew Zilinski was a senior at Norwich University, a military college in Vermont, when Dennis was killed. Yet he continued with his plans for military service. A member of the Army National Guard, Matthew Zilinski, now 24, is a 1st lieutenant with the 508th Military Police Co. in Teaneck.

The memorial run, expected to draw anywhere from 1,200 to 1,500 participants, is the Zilinski family's way of paying tribute to the sacrifices of soldiers.

"My parents lost a son. I lost my brother. I lost my best friend," Matthew said. "On the run, you can see how much pleasure and how much life we're putting out in my brother's name. We're supporting all these other people. We're giving them a new life, a new beginning. We're giving them something to make their life that much easier. It's in the name and honor of my brother."

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