

SUNDAY, MAY 29, 2016 | BABYLON-ISLIP

Newsday

Llife

**VOLUNTEER
NATION**
A MONTHLY SERIES

Play ball!

ON A NEW FIELD,
THE LEAGUE OF YES
HELPS KIDS
WITH DISABILITIES
ROUND THE BASES

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EX-GRUMMAN EXEC DEVOTES RETIREMENT TO RESEARCHING THE LIST E23



BOB L. JONES

"I am only one, but still I am one. I cannot do everything, but still I can do something; and because I cannot do everything, I will not refuse to do the something that I can do."

— Edward Everett Hale

A new field of dreams

At Eisenhower Park in East Meadow, players with special needs have some special friends in the League of YES

VOLUNTEER NATION A MONTHLY SERIES

BY CARL CORRY
Special to Newsday

Every hit is a home run at the new League of YES baseball field at Eisenhower Park in East Meadow, where the turf is like a big cushion, duck-duck-goose fills the time in the outfield and "no" is always out.

Game day comes with other perks, too, for the league's special-needs players, who range from 5 to 26 years old and round the bases on their own two feet — prosthetics included — or with the aid of walkers, wheelchairs and other motorized devices.

All players are assigned a "buddy" to help them at bat, round the bases, and play and stay safe in the outfield. If there are more buddies than players, the solo buddies form a "tunnel of love" along the third-base line with outstretched arms to cheer players home.

Players come from near and far to help the nonprofit uphold its declaration that everybody deserves the opportunity to play baseball.

"I get to come out and meet people like me," said Jayson Torres, 15, who has muscular dystrophy and uses a wheelchair. "I don't have to worry about anyone staring at me."

Until the start of this season,



ON THE COVER
Keith Kuhn runs through the League of YES "tunnel of love" at the new special turf field in Eisenhower Park in East Meadow.

every Saturday since 2012, for six weeks in the spring and six weeks in the fall, Torres and his parents, Jose and Migdalia, drove from Ridgewood or Kew Gardens in Queens to the League of YES' first Long Island location — a specially designed asphalt ballfield in a parking lot of the PennySaver Amphitheater at Bald Hill in Farmingville — to play in games.

"The commute was longer than the actual game," sometimes, said Migdalia Torres, 40, a high school history teacher.

But the trip was worth it, she said. "It's been a touching experience. You see a multiple array of disabilities, so all the disabilities disappear."



Kristine Fitzpatrick, founder of the League of YES, at the new ballfield at Eisenhower Park.

RYAN C. JONES



Claire Becker, 13, above, is helped around the bases by League of YES buddies. Right, Paige Perrone, 16, and Kirstin Schlecht, 15, help Nick Holman, 8, swing for a hit.



RYAN C. JONES

bringing my kids up [to Westchester] every single weekend for four years, we need to do this on Long Island," she said, referring to Peter, 21, and Wade, 17, neither of whom has disabilities.

Fitzpatrick made a presentation in 2011 to Town of Brookhaven parks officials, who agreed to give the newly formed Miracle League of Long Island \$10,000 for player uniforms and shirts for volunteers, as well as permission to take over an asphalt field, Bald Hill, that was designed for disabled athletes but that hadn't been used in years.

The league had been incorporated in 2010, with a pilot season in fall 2011 and a first full season in spring 2012. It began with about 30 players and 30 volunteers and grew to include more than 200 players and 1,000 volunteers.

In 2015, the group became the League of YES (for "You Experience Success"), and Fitzpatrick continued her

efforts to expand beyond baseball and Farmingville to include soccer and lacrosse and create chapters across the country.

A major leap toward that goal came on April 30, when about 400 people celebrated the league's opening day at a new \$560,000 multipurpose, handicapped-accessible sports field at Field 8 in Eisenhower Park. Nassau County Executive Edward P. Mangano cut the ribbon and threw out the first pitch. Costumed princesses took pictures with players, singers from Kellenberg Memorial High School sang the national anthem and the FREE Players Drum Corps performed.

The field is a synthetic turf manufactured by Sprinturf and installed by Ridge-based Laser Industries. The material makes play safer for those using walkers, wheelchairs or other adaptive devices, and those

See COVER STORY on E8

patrick, was known as the Miracle League of Long Island. Fitzpatrick got involved with the Miracle League as a board member for the Westchester branch in 2006, when she was

selling synthetic turf in that territory.

"I had no idea how I would fall in love after the first pitch," recalled Fitzpatrick, 49, of Dix Hills. "I decided that, after

Love at first pitch

When Jayson Torres began playing, the organization, which was brought to Long Island by its founder and executive director, Kristine Fitz-

This league is a big hit

COVER STORY from E6

with prosthetics. The field has a drainage system that allows it to dry within minutes after a rainfall, and walkers and wheelchairs don't get stuck in it.

"We're not nervous of the kids falling over," Fitzpatrick said.

Another benefit of the field is that it gives those with disabilities who live in and around Nassau County a more convenient place to enjoy the national pastime — including the Torres family, whose commute was cut by more than half.

The League of YES has spring and fall seasons. Games are on Saturdays for six weeks. Fitzpatrick and field director R. Greg Cooke, a former Long Islander who lives in Westfield, New Jersey, arrange the schedules for the 11 teams (four in Nassau, seven in Suffolk), and the coaches report to Cooke.

One of the teams is for older players with higher skill levels. It plays at Bald Hill on a typical Little League field, and the players get training during the winter from Matt Guiliano, a former Long Island Ducks player who runs Play Like a Pro, an indoor baseball and softball training facility in Hauppauge. The travel baseball team of Hank's Yanks — a nonprofit sponsored by New York Yankees owner Hank Steinbrenner — also assists the League of YES team each week.

At Eisenhower Park, the Nassau County Parks Department is in contact with other groups that assist the disabled and that may want to play at the facility, "with the goal of hosting athletic activity on the field seven days a week," said spokeswoman Mary Studdert.

Among the new players is 13-year-old Michael Buonomo, of Hicksville, who has autism and suffers from seizures. "I like hitting the ball. ... I like running," Michael said.

His mother, Linda Buonomo, 52, said the league is a welcome addition to the area. "I think it's a fantastic thing for the kids," she said. "We don't have anything else like this in Nassau."

Tony Buonomo, 59, Michael's father, said the new ballpark is

a good use of county funds. "Tax dollars need to be spent on special-needs kids," he said.

Another family new to the league is the Angottis, of Westbury. Mathew, 12, has autism and communicates using an

iPad app. His mother, Carol, 43, said her son's baseball skills have improved since opening day. Her other son, Nickolas, 10, is a buddy.

"I get to meet lots of new people, people that are like my

brother," Nickolas said after assisting a player around the bases.

Series of fundraisers

The League of YES is largely supported through its annual

major events, including a gala, a golf outing (which is set for June 16 at the Vineyards Golf Club in Riverhead) and a walk.

The nonprofit raises about \$60,000 a year from the gala, the golf outing and a Nassau



The FREE Players Drum Corps performs for the opening of the League of YES ball field at Eisenhower Park in East Meadow.



Nassau County Executive Edward Mangano helps Brittany Fox cut the ribbon at the opening ceremony.



Dennis Nguyen, with player Keith Kuhn, who is autistic, take in the game at the opening of the new field.

Volunteer Spotlight

Michael Gutierrez

In 2014, Michael Gutierrez was recovering from a head injury after taking what he described as a "nasty spill" off his bike, and missed the first game volunteering for what was then called the Miracle League of Long Island.

A group of his Pi Kappa Phi brothers at St. John's University drove from Jamaica, Queens, to a ballfield at Bald Hill in Farmingville — about an hour each way — and came back in high spirits.

"When I heard about how amazing it was, I decided I needed to go back," said Gutierrez, who joined fraternity members about a month later to volunteer for another game.

"It started as something I liked a lot," said Gutierrez, 21, who is now president of the fraternity and has stayed involved with the organization, now called the League of YES, ever since. "Eventually, it turned into us adopting them as our local philanthropy."

When the league is in season, Gutierrez — who is majoring in sports management and will be a senior in the fall — can be found during games offering a hand wherever it is needed. In the offseason, he is looking to assist the league's growth and cultivate its interaction with Pi Kappa Phi and St. John's.

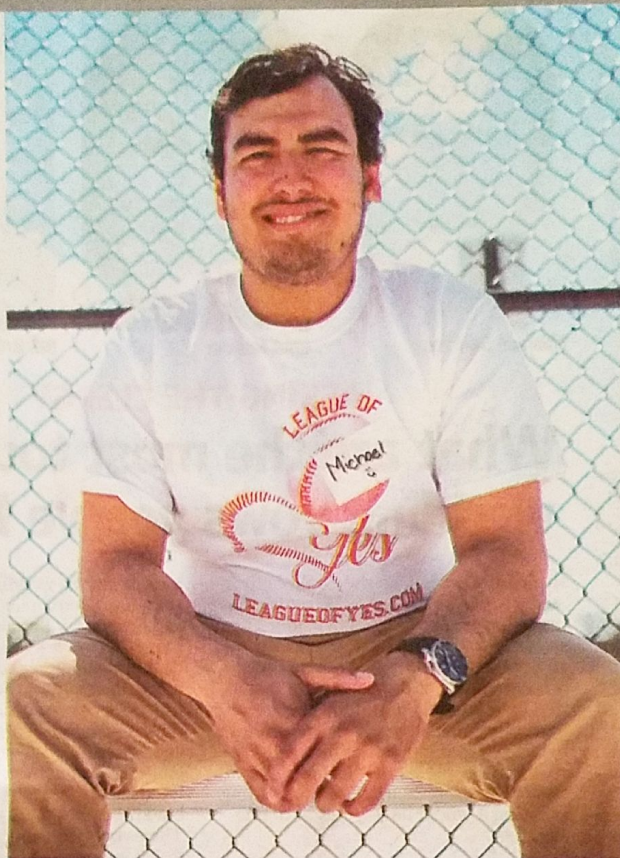
"Our focus has been transitioning to just going to the games to being part of their organization and helping them expand," Gutierrez said.

This past Valentine's Day, he helped arrange for league members to visit St. John's, with the support of the campus' entire Greek community. Players met and ate lunch with fraternity and sorority members and then attended a St. John's women's basketball game, where the league was honored during halftime.

Gutierrez, who is from Orange, California, recently returned home and will participate in the "Journey of Hope," a charity bike ride from Long Beach, California, to Washington, D.C., covering 3,555 miles from June 13 to Aug. 13. Riders from Gutierrez's group will join two others — all members of Pi Kappa Phi — that will traverse 32 states and pedal for 12,000 miles. The bikers' goal is "spreading the message of acceptance and understanding for people with disabilities," according to the event's website.

"The League of YES was the inspiration for my bike ride," Gutierrez said. "I'm doing it for them above all else; for people to hear their story. I know a lot of them will come out to Washington to see me, and that will be very special."

— CARL CORRY



RYAN C. JONES

Sign me up

The League of YES needs funding to help feed volunteers in between the games held at each of its fields on Saturdays during the spring and fall seasons. It is also seeking buddies.

To become a BUDDY (Because Unbelievable Dedication Deserves You), sign up via the link on

leagueofyes.com

There is no requirement for how many times a buddy must participate, said the league's founder, Kristine Fitzpatrick.

"Come one week, come six weeks, come all 12."

For more information or to volunteer, call 631-278-6385; email kristine@leagueofyes.com; or write to League of YES, P.O. Box 218, Babylon, NY 11702.

You might consider . . .

The Plainview Little League runs a Challenger division for children 5 and older with special needs. The division plays in the spring and fall and has no residency restrictions. The division, which has grown from about a dozen players to more than 40 over the past five years, needs volunteer buddies to assist players and provide help in the dugout.

Contact: 516-242-1496; plainviewbaseball.org

Long Island Junior Soccer League Inc., the parent organization for about 100 soccer clubs on Long Island, facilitates the TOPSoccer (The Outreach Program for Soccer) program. It was designed by the league's governing body, the United States Youth Soccer Association, for children and young adults who have physical and/or intellectual disabilities. It is open to boys and girls ages 4 to 19. The clubs need buddies to serve as coaches and make sure everyone has fun. The soccer league gives out two scholarships to high school volunteers each year.

Contact: 631-648-9020; lijsoccer.com

For more information and volunteer opportunities, contact the **LONG ISLAND VOLUNTEER CENTER** at 516-564-5482; longislandvolunteercenter.org

walk, which is scheduled for late October. It also has smaller fundraisers such as pub crawls and carwashes. Fitzpatrick said the League of YES will seek grants, sponsors and other donations to help it grow beyond baseball and around the country.

She operates her group with the help of an 11-member executive team and a board of directors.

"They do the day in and day out for organizing, planning for fundraisers, attending the games and getting the kids together," Fitzpatrick said of the executive team, adding that they also help update the organization's website, recruit players and send out email

alerts.

Fitzpatrick, Cooke and treasurer Jill Christensen get stipends ranging from \$5,000 to \$20,000. Among those to first get involved in the non-profit was Christensen, 52, an associate athletic trainer at St. John's who travels with the women's basketball team. She trained Fitzpatrick at the university when Fitzpatrick was a star track-and-field athlete in the late 1980s. They have been close since.

"I was there sitting at her kitchen table when she set as one of her goals for the year to start the Miracle League of Long Island," said Christensen, whose nephew, Nick Christensen, 33, has cerebral palsy

and played in a similar program in Iowa when he was a child.

"You can see year after year how they change and how much more confident they get," said Christensen, noting that siblings have come to participate. "One of our goals is, we said 'no' to nobody. Come whenever you can, we'll figure it out. We wanted it to be a fun situation."

With no prior experience launching a nonprofit, Fitzpatrick, who is now a higher-education sales representative at New York State Industries for the Disabled, in Albany, set the group up as a 501(c)3, built an executive team and a board of directors, planned the

group's website design, registered volunteers and established meeting schedules.

Fitzpatrick said everyone on the board of directors recruits the buddies, and Cooke, the field director, coordinates which Long Island field they go to each week. The tunnel of love was the idea of a volunteer from the St. John's baseball team, who suggested it after volunteers outnumbered players.

If players are unable to hold a bat, their buddy will help them swing, swing it for them or pitch the soft yellow ball to them. When the bat makes contact, often from a tee-stand, the buddy runs alongside the player, making sure he or she

doesn't veer too far off the base paths.

Polly Taylor, 16, a sophomore at Kellenberg who was in the chorus on opening day, decided to return as a buddy.

"I loved the positive experience, and it really gives you a perspective," said Taylor, whose enthusiasm persuaded her brother Sam, 14, and mother, Eileen, 52, also to volunteer.

Jose Torres, Jayson's father, urged people who don't have children with disabilities to learn about the League of YES and volunteer.

"The people who are in the organization are genuine," he said, "and the enthusiasm they have is amazing."