

Merrick

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Heart attack waiting to happen?

School testing program finds eight students with undetected conditions

By LAURA LANE

Fran Licausi decided to play it safe. Her son Gregory, a strapping eighth-grader who was voted most valuable player on the Grand Avenue Middle School baseball team, appeared to be in perfect health. Still, Licausi thought it might be a

good idea to have her son's heart tested.

Like all parents of eighth-graders at Grand and Merrick Avenue middle schools, Licausi recently received a letter from the Bellmore-Merrick Central High School District administration, offering free echocardiograms to children who were thinking of taking part in sports.

The Jason F. Gruen Foundation arranged for the testing. Technicians from Schneider Children's Hospital at Long Island Jewish/North Shore University Hospital performed the tests.

Merokean Susan Helsinger created the foundation to honor her teenage son, Jason Gruen, who died of an undetected heart condition. Helsinger wants no other children to suffer the same fate.

Some 260 children from the Merricks and Bellmores underwent the testing. Gregor

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Students tested

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Licausi was one of eight children who tested positive for heart abnormalities. Helsing said that six will need treatment.

"At first, Gregory was hesitant to have the test done because he plays baseball, but I told him not to worry because he's healthy," said his mother, adding that her son is big for his age, at 5 feet 7 and 158 pounds. "I noticed they were taking a little longer with the test than with the other kids, but they didn't tell us anything at the time, saying they'd call in two weeks."

The Licausis soon got calls from Schneider Children's Hospital and from Gregory's pediatrician. "They told me that Gregory has an enlarged aorta, probably due to his height and weight," his mother said. "They said it isn't life-threatening, but my son went in for further testing."

Gregory can still play baseball, but he cannot lift anything heavy, and he has to be aware of chest pains or shortness of breath.

"I think this is a great idea, this testing, because when you go to a pediatrician, they don't do this test," said his mother. "He seemed fine. We just never knew."

Saul Lerner, the director of athletics at the Bellmore-Merrick Central High School District, was instrumental in helping to pave the way for Helsing to hold the testing on school grounds. Lerner said he knew it would be valuable to make sure children were healthy, but he was surprised by the number who tested positive for heart abnormalities.

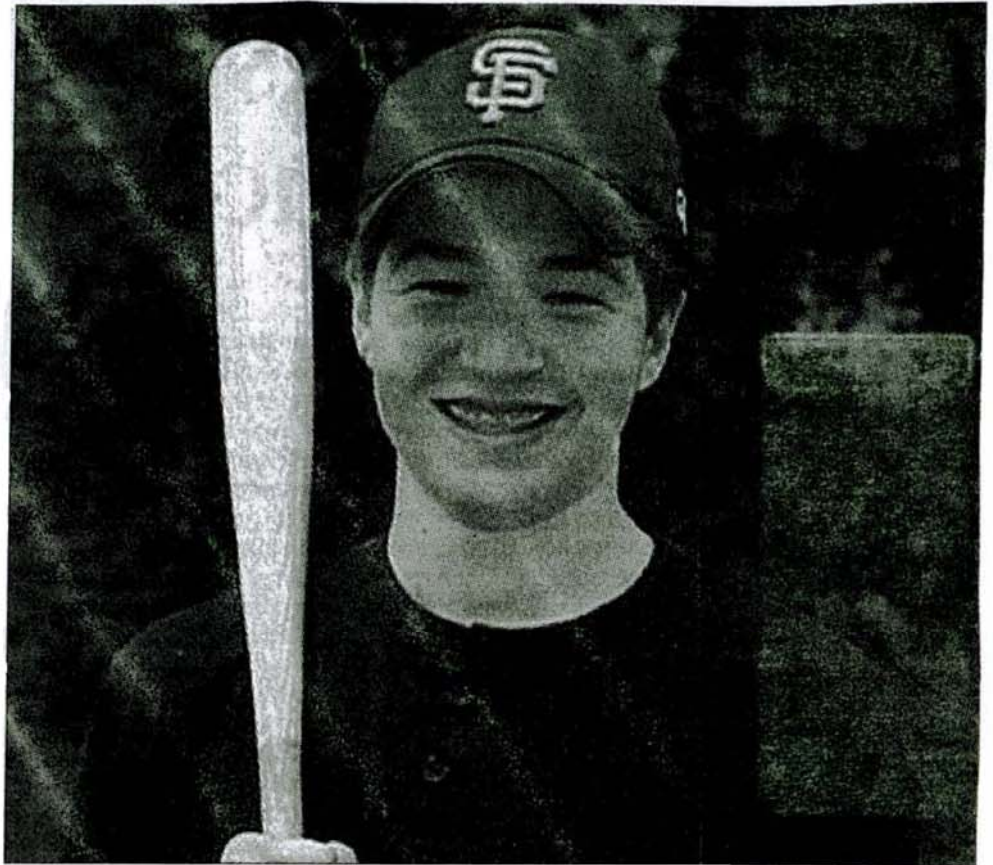
"It's remarkable that we found eight

kids," Lerner said. "I thought if we found anyone, it would be a small or minor irregularity, but Mrs. Licausi's son's illness could be life-threatening."

Helsing plans to offer the test once again in the fall to children thinking of participating in a sport. "Doing this in the fall will cover the entire year of sports," Helsing explained. "We'll test more children."

Dr. Fredrick Bierman, chief of pediatric cardiology at Schneider Children's Hospital, told Helsing that echocardiogram testing in middle school is done nowhere else in the U.S. "Dr. Bierman said he's sending the results of this testing to pediatric cardiologists throughout the country," said Helsing, adding that Italy is the only country that requires echocardiograms and electrocardiograms for middle-school children. "My goal is to have echocardiograms mandatory throughout every school system, or when children go in for a check-up with their pediatrician. The problem is it's such an expensive test that the insurance companies don't want to pay for it."

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Courtesy the Licausi family

EIGHTH-GRADER GREGORY LICAUSI had no idea that he had an abnormality in his heart until he was tested by technicians from Schneider Children's Hospital.