

HERALD SCHOOLS

WHAT'S NEWS IN AND OUT OF THE CLASSROOM

Screening to save lives

Memorial students get free heart exams

By ANTHONY BOTTAN

About 65 eighth-graders came down to Memorial Junior High School on Oct. 3 to undergo a free echocardiogram screening, courtesy of the Jason F. Gruen Research Foundation. The testing was performed by Dr. Fred Bierman, chief pediatric cardiologist for Schneider's Children's Hospital.

Susan Gruen Helsinger, founder of the Jason F. Gruen Research Foundation, said that early identification of heart irregularities is the key to preventing loss of life. "A regular physical check up is not sufficient enough to detect a life threatening heart abnormality," she said.

Gruen Helsinger lost her son Jason in 1985 when he died suddenly from a heart ailment while he walked into class at Manhasset High School. Jason was a sophomore, and suffered from hypertrophic cardiomyopathy, a heart disease where the heart muscle becomes abnormally thick and restricts blood flow.

"I started this foundation because I wanted to keep his memory alive and because we wanted to do research in the field of pediatric cardiology to find out what we could do to save our children," Gruen Helsinger said.

Initially, the foundation helped build a children's heart center at what is now New York Presbyterian Hospital. It also awards research grants to explore pediatric cardiology and sudden death in children. Gruen Helsinger's foundation has done heart screenings in the Bellmore-Merrick and Long Beach school districts. The foundation has screened more than 1,000 teenagers, and uncovered heart abnormalities in 25 kids.

Dr. Bill Heidenreich, assistant superintendent for personnel and administration in the Valley Stream Central High School District, said he was



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FREE HEART SCREENINGS were offered to Central High School District eighth-graders on Oct. 4. From left are Assistant Superintendent Bill Heidenreich, Susan Gruen Helsinger, founder of Jason Gruen Research Foundation, Dela Moore, chief echocardiology technician at Schneider's Children's Hospital, Dr. Fred Bierman, director of pediatric cardiology at Schneider's and local real estate agent Carol Gallo Turschmann.

approached last year by Carol Gallo Turschman, a local realtor whose group — the Long Island Board of Realtor's Nassau South Shore chapter — partnered with the Jason F. Gruen Research Foundation to raise money for the philanthropic endeavor. Gallo Turschman urged the board to bring the heart screenings to the district. Heidenreich said he learned that abnormalities may begin to form in children when they turn 12 or 13. "The medical community advised that this is the age range where abnormalities manifest themselves," Heidenreich said. "In terms of child development, this is the time to do the test."

Heidenreich added that it takes 6-8 weeks before the results of the echocardiogram are known. If an abnormality is found, he said, doctors from Schneider's Hospital conduct a follow

up with the family, and they are given guidance on how to address the health issue.

Gallo Turschman, who lives in Valley Stream, said she had numerous meetings with the Central High School District board about bringing the heart screenings to her hometown. "I'm so passionate about this foundation because it saves kids' lives," she said. "Hopefully we can save some lives in Valley Stream."

The Long Island Board of Realtor's Nassau South Shore chapter is hosting its second annual Realtor Sock Hop on Oct. 16 to raise money for the Jason F. Gruen Research Foundation. Last year, the fundraiser brought in more than \$6,000, which Gallo Turschman said was earmarked for the screenings in Valley Stream. This year's event will be held at the Lido Sands Beach Club.