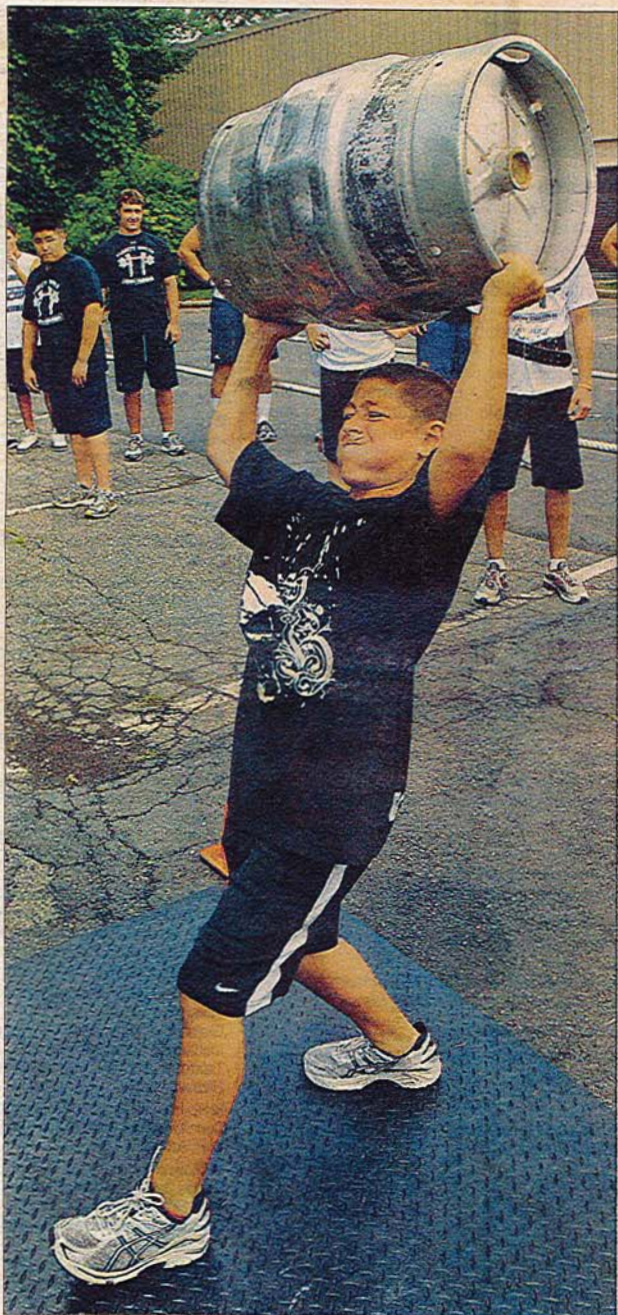


Local

Sun. 07.19.09



Rob Amonica lifting a 65-pound keg in the Strongman Challenge in Old Tappan. The day honored Michael F. LaViola, who died in 2008.

Friends, athletes flex to fight cancer



STAFF PHOTOS BY DAVID BERGELAND

Chris Kenneally competing in the truck pull at Saturday's competition.

Raise funds in ex-student's name

By JOHN A. GAVIN
STAFF WRITER

LaViola Foundation



The foundation is named for Michael F. LaViola, a former high school football player who died of synovial sarcoma in February 2008.

For more information about synovial sarcoma, foundation events and how to help, go to michaellaviolafoundation.org

OLD TAPPAN — As young athletes pulled, strained and lifted weights that tested their raw strength and endurance, Saturday's first Strongman Challenge had more to do with camaraderie than competition within weight classes or for points toward athletics scholarships.

A benefit for the LaViola Foundation, the event also had a more pressing need — to bring an awareness about synovial sarcoma and launch an effort to help fund research to find a cure for the debilitating disease.

Held at the Varsity House gym on Central Avenue, the event had a grass-roots connection to Michael F. LaViola, a former high school football player who succumbed to the disease in February 2008, months before reaching his 21st birthday.

Twenty-eight athletes, who ranged from 12 years old to college age, competed in everything from lifting 65 pound kegs to pulling a 4,500-pound Honda truck.

Several who participated Saturday played football with and against LaViola when he

was a hard-nosed, 220-pound tackle at Northern Valley High School in Old Tappan.

"It's good for his family to see that we are supporting this cause," said Chris Kenneally, 22, a former classmate and teammate who now plays football for the State University of New York at Albany. "I'm glad to help them out."

James McNerney, 13, of Northvale, who plays football and baseball, said flipping a huge tire is not what he normally does for fun but that it was all for a good cause.

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Strong

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"It was nice to help the family out," said McNerney, a student at Nathan Hale Middle School. "I like to compete."

Started in February by LaViola's family, the foundation has donated \$10,000 to the National Cancer Institute in Bethesda, Md., for research and plans to award two \$1,500 scholarships to deserving students from LaViola's alma mater, Northern Valley High.

"We wanted to keep Mike's memory alive," said Michael C. LaViola, his father, an Alpine police lieutenant. "We wanted something positive to come out of his illness."

rare, research is not funded by major foundations, he said. With synovial sarcoma, a slow-moving tumor can form anywhere in the body where there is bone, muscle, or connective tissue.

In June, the foundation held a dinner at a local golf club, earning enough funds to make its donation to the institute and raffle off a two-seat Smart Car.

Saturday's Strongman Challenge was funded by 10 businesses making donations of \$550 each, athletes paying \$25 to participate, a raffle and the sale of T-shirts.

"It was a great way to get the community involved," said Dan Goodman, 23, co-owner of the Varsity House strength and conditioning gym, who once played football with LaViola.



DAVID BERGELAND/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Thomas Kramer flipping a tractor tire during the Strongman Challenge. A total of 28 athletes competed in several tests.

Because synovial sarcoma is

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