

# FEATS OF STRENGTH:

## Strongman Challenge raises funds

Just how strong are you?

That was the challenge posed to participants in the sixth annual Strongman Challenge, hosted by Varsity House Gym and benefiting the Michael LaViola Foundation. Held every year, the event involves athletes performing feats of strength for the purpose of raising funds for two very worthwhile causes: cancer research and scholarships for local students.

Though the Strongman Challenge was a venue for participants to show their physical strength, the event is held in memory of Michael LaViola, who showed true mettle in the face of adversity.

LaViola was just 21 years old when his life was cut tragically and prematurely short by a rare form of cancer called Sinovial Sarcoma in 2008. But even in his final days, he refused to quit – and that takes true strength.

“He never stopped hoping and living, and in his own words, he

lunge was born – held in the memory of perhaps the strongest man Old Tappan has ever known.

Proceeds raised from this event go to two scholarships for graduating seniors at Northern Valley Old Tappan. One scholarship is given to a student who plans on pursuing a career in medicine, and another is given to a football player (LaViola played all four years of his high school career for the Golden Knights).

The remaining funds go to Dr. Melinda Merchant, now a cancer researcher at the National Institute of Health and the National Cancer Institute, who was LaViola’s physician. She is dedicated entirely to finding a cure for Synovial Sarcoma and other sarcomas.

At the Strongman Challenge, participants were split into four groups: eighth and ninth graders, high schoolers, and college and professional athletes under and over 220 pounds. Events included



Pictured here are the organizers of the sixth annual Michael LaViola Foundation’s Strongman Challenge (from left): Varsity House Gym general manager Trevor Lang, Varsity House Gym house general manager Daniel Goodman, Katie LaViola, Michael LaViola, Mary LaViola and Varsity House Gym owner Joe Riggio.

ing up to 500 pounds, and a truck and sled pull – where the college and pro athletes over 220 pounds attempted to haul a 10,000 pound Dodge Ram!

The winners at the Strongman Challenge are as follows:

### Juniors (Eighth and ninth grade)

- First: Stephen Crevani.
- Second: Sol Benishay and Chris Donnelly (tie).
- Third: Shane Griffith.

### Varsity (High schoolers)

- First: Greg Schwartz.
- Second: Michael Melograno.
- Third: Zach Alsharif.

### College/pro under 220 pounds

- First: Brian Kelly.
- Second: Jordan Migliore.
- Third: Joey Trumbetti.

### College/pro over 220 pounds

- First: Martin Scheuring.



Chris Kenneally shows off his strength during the overhead log press event.

“never, never, never” gave up,” his family remembers.

Thus, the Strongman Chal-

an overhead press with Olympic barbells and stell logs, a farmer’s walk and tire flip with tires weigh-



College and pro athletes over 220 pounds were challenged to pull 10,000 pound Dodge Ram!



Shane Griffith flips a 350-pound tire.

- Second: Thomas Hayes.
- Third: James McNerney.

“Varsity House is honored that the community came together, not only to honor the memory of our lost friend, but to contribute to such a noble cause,” said Varsity House Gym general manager Trevor Lang. “We are proud to see our athletes, friends and families unite each year for this special event. With the support of everyone, we can truly make a difference.”

In its first five years, the event had raised over \$35,000. This year’s event smashed any prior record for a single year, as the sixth Strongman Challenge and the final one in Old Tappan raised about \$24,000.

“This was our best year yet,” Michael LaViola Sr. told Northern Valley Press. “There was overwhelming attendance this year.”

“It was a fabulous, fabulous year,” agreed his wife Mary LaViola.

Lang added that he estimated there to be around 300 people in attendance.

LaViola Sr. said that knowing this was the event’s final year in Old Tappan was “bittersweet.” Varsity House Gym will be moving across the border to Orangetown, N.Y., by next year’s Strongman Challenge.

“Old Tappan has been so generous and gracious in assisting us and promoting the event,” said LaViola, a recently retired police captain and a borough resident for 45 years. “We’re going to miss all of that. My wife, my daughter and I are very grateful to Old Tappan for all of the support.”

As for next year’s event, LaViola told Northern Valley Press he already has “a few new ideas” brewing to make the Strongman Challenge an even bigger success. He hopes to break the record again in 2015.

“I can’t say enough good things about this town and the people who live in it,” he concluded. “I’m very proud to be a part of this community.”

Photos by Murray Bass