

Longtime Supporter, Mike Freni, completes 17th Boston Marathon in Support of the Lurie Center for Autism

On Monday, April 15, 2024, 30,000 runners participated in the 128th running of the Boston Marathon. Among them was Mike Freni, a North Shore resident and dedicated parent whose son receives care at the Lurie Center. This year marked Mr. Freni's 17th year running the Boston marathon to raise funds for the Lurie Center for Autism as part of "Joey's Team," named in honor of his son, Joseph.

"Joseph has been a patient of the Lurie Center for Autism for over 16 years, and it has become an integral part of our family," said Mr. Freni. "After our initial encounter with the Lurie Center, we decided we wanted to do something to give back. The idea of participating in the marathon just popped into our heads."

Mike and his wife Melissa first learned about the Lurie Center for Autism for Autism around 16 years ago when their middle child, Joseph, was diagnosed with autism at 18 months old. "Following his diagnosis, we turned to the Lurie Center due to its comprehensive multi-disciplinary approach," explained Mr. Freni. "At the Lurie Center we consulted with various specialists, from a gastroenterologist to a neurologist, who really helped us chart a path forward."

The treatment plan developed in collaboration with the Lurie Center for Autism has guided Joseph's care over the years. "Joey is now 18 and has benefited from the coordinated care and expertise provided by the Lurie Center," said Mr. Freni. Joseph continues to receive care at the Lurie Center for Autism, with ongoing support during transitional periods. "We recently met with Julie O'Brien, a family support clinician at the Lurie Center, because Joseph just turned 18, and Julie is helping us navigate the transition to adult services. I can't tell you how much we love Julie and how wonderful she's been for us."

Joseph, who is non-verbal, relies on a tablet to communicate his needs and to request preferred food items. "Despite facing significant challenges, he continues to make incremental progress," said Mr. Freni.

Marathon running didn't come naturally to Mr. Freni at first. Despite participating in high school sports, he never considered himself a runner. "I ran when I had to," he jokes. "I had never participated in a road race. The Boston Marathon for Joey's Team was actually my first road race."



Mike Freni (r) and his brother, Rob (l), smile for the camera after getting dropped off at the starting line.

Over his marathon career, Mr. Freni has endured nearly everything temperamental Boston weather can throw at a runner: “I’ve had almost every weather event to this point—except for snow. There was one year that it was like 90 degrees. There was one year with driving, cold rain. I’ve run in it all.”

What keeps him going through those grueling 26.2 miles? “I am usually thinking: How quickly can I get this over with?” he jokes, “but seriously, I do remember why I’m doing it. I think about the families that don’t have the resources that we did, and I think, hey, we raised \$10,000 this year. How many visits is that...? It feels good to have the ability to be able to pass that forward to other families.” Over the years, Joey’s Team raised over \$200,000 for the Lurie Center for Autism. After 17 years, Mr. Freni acknowledges that age isn’t making the race any easier, but he remains resolute about participating in future marathons. “As long as my body holds up, I’m going to keep doing it.”

Meanwhile, he’s not the only one getting older. As Joseph transitions into adulthood, the Freni family faces uncertainties about what the future holds. Services for adults can be hard to find and they worry about how best to support Joseph long-term. “It’s the great unknown for us right now because, we just don’t know what services will look like down the road. It’s one of those things we hate to think about, but we have to think about it.”

He’s hopeful that the Lurie Center for Autism will continue to help guide and support the family as Joseph progresses further into adulthood. “It’s been a journey for us, and the Lurie Center has shepherded us along each step of the way.”

To view the “Joey’s Team” GivenGain page, click [here](#).