Riverdale resident with MS runs relay across America

BY KYLE VUILLE

Running 28 miles a day for five days straight would be feat for most people, let alone someone with an autoimmune disease.

On July 13, a Bronx woman will be running 141 miles over the course of five days to raise $10,000 to spread awareness for multiple sclerosis.

Wilmen Blake, 41, of Riverdale, has always been an avid runner, but her whole life changed when she was diagnosed with MS in 2013.

“I remember I started feeling this tingling and numbness on my right side of my body,” Blake said. “It felt like someone drew a line right down the middle of me.”

Blake’s initial concerns were about the disease’s progression and how it would affect her life in the years to come.

After she started taking medication and treatment for MS, she said she wanted to block out the side effects because she didn’t want her diagnosis to be the center of her life.

“I decided if MS was going to be a passenger in my life then I’m going to give it one hell of a ride,” Blake said.

Blake has segment 15 of the relay assigned to her. Her five-day 141-mile journey will start in Valparaiso, IN and end in Van Wert, OH, averaging 28 miles a day.

In preparation of the race, Blake has found herself involved in all sorts of training besides running every day.

Her six month training program includes kickboxing, kettle ball training, rowing, swimming and other forms of cross training.

However, Blake still finds time for her family and her job in advertising.

Blake said she starts her day at 4 a.m. and hits the pavement before she gets her kids ready for school and out the door herself for work.

“It’s the only time I have for myself,” Blake joked.

Her two children, Zander, 12, and Lucy, 8, join in on her runs, trailing her on a scooter or bicycle while she teaches them about MS.

Blake said she finds herself very grateful for the support and love she receives from family and friends.

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Dancers in the Black Iris Project, which recently received grant money from the city.

Its Own awards to even more artists. We are very grateful for this increased support, and hope that funding continues at this level or higher in the years ahead so that BCA can continue strengthening the cultural ecosystem of the Bronx,” she added.

One of the recipients in the borough was Jeremy McQueen, an award-winning choreographer, who started The Black Iris Project in 2016, which is a ballet that celebrates diversity and black history.

He won $5,000 from Bronx Recognizes Its Own (BRIO), which provides support to artists who create works in the literary, media, visual and performing arts.

McQueen spoke to the Bronx Times about the money. The funds will help form the creation of a new ballet, The Storm, which centers on the destruction caused by tumultuous hurricanes that have taken place in the United States over the last 15 years and the Middle Passage.

“The Black Iris Project from its inception has been about creating movement within the Black community that has housed diversity, justice, equity and inclusion,” McQueen said. “Communities of color are not often ones that can always afford or have access to high quality performing arts experiences. The work I do as an educator and choreographer with The Black Iris Project has specifically made it possible for various communities of color to have access to live art and to see themselves in the art that is shared onstage as a source of inspiration.”

Another winner was Ivan Velez Jr., a comic artist that received close to $11,000 for three community engagement grants, “New Work,” “Arts Fund” and “Community Arts” and an artist residency called Su-Casa. SU-CASA is a program that aims to enrich the lives of senior citizens through the arts.

This grant will help fund programming and events and provide art supplies, advertising, and financial support for larger events.

“I’m an individual artist who has used my grant funding mostly to support my art instruction programs and celebrations,” Velez said. “I’ve also been able to create art events for the community where other artists can meet and create together, as well as inspire people who would not normally consider themselves artists to participate and create.”
An animal rights group and the Bronx Zoo are in a legal battle over the future of Happy the Elephant.

Photo Courtesy Gigi Glendinning