



TIM LAMORTE/RIVERTOWNS ENTERPRISE

Jon Kole of the Hebrew Home awaits a pitch from Mike Macchia of Tony's Pizzeria.

## Tournament hits a homerun for dementia caregivers

By Eugene Rapay

IRVINGTON — For the first time ever, the lights at Scenic Hudson Park stayed on throughout the night, as more than 100 people gathered for competitive fun and to support a good cause.

CaringKind and the Hebrew Home at Riverdale hosted an overnight one-pitch, double-elimination co-ed softball tournament to raise awareness about the 24/7 demands on Alzheimer's caregivers and those diagnosed with the debilitating condition. The inaugural fundraiser ran from 10:30 p.m. on June 22 to 6 a.m. on June 23.

There was symbolic reasoning behind the hours of play.

"The most difficult time for people that are suffering from the disease and for the people who care for them are

these hours — 8 o'clock at night until 6 o'clock in the morning," said Dave Pomeranz, the chief operating officer of RiverSpring Health, the parent organization of the Hebrew Home. "Caregivers are often exhausted from their day lives, and they have to find the energy to still be caregivers for the people they care for. People with Alzheimer's have clocks that are off in their brain, so they're often feeling their most awake and agitated during the overnight hours."

Pomeranz, an Irvington resident, came up with the idea for an overnight tournament during the winter. His mother has Alzheimer's. He wanted to raise awareness about the disease and ended up pairing it with his love for softball, which he plays often. The partnership with CaringKind, a New York City-based organi-

zation dedicated to Alzheimer's and dementia caregiving, was natural. The idea was put into motion and came to fruition six months later.

According to the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Alzheimer's is the most common type of dementia, one that impacts memory, thinking, and behavior. It is a progressive disease that begins with mild memory loss and worsens over time, affecting a person's ability to carry out daily activities. There are different treatments for Alzheimer's, but it is currently incurable. Symptoms commonly appear after the age of 60 and risk increases with age. The Alzheimer's Association estimates approximately 5.7 million Americans currently have the disease, and that number is expected to skyrocket to 14 million by 2050.

"There's often challenging behaviors — the inability to cope with anxiety, inability to sleep at night, time of day, the change in what they like and don't like," said Brooke Santoro, a caregiver and Pomeranz's teammate on the RiverSpring Health squad. "It's like getting to know someone for the first time all over again, because their likes and dislikes change. Sometimes the censor they once had, when they don't like something, disappears. It can be pretty intense and scary, if you once knew them for their entire life prior to when they started to decline due to the disease."

Santoro participated in honor of her grandfather, who had Alzheimer's and who passed away in 2009, and her grandmother, who also had

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the disease and who died this past year.

"If I were to give someone advice, it would be to pay attention to the little funny moments that still exist," Santoro said. "Like I said, it's like getting to know someone for the first time... There's some humor in that, there's still a lot of jokes to be had — fun to be had. I'd say hold on to those moments, so when you have those sleepless nights and if you're feeling really ready to give up, you hold onto those moments."

Approximately 100 players distributed across eight teams from different parts of Westchester County competed that night. Most of them, like Santoro and Pomeranz, were playing on someone's behalf, wearing a uniform patch that featured the name of someone they know who is battling the disease. Rain fell for a few hours to start the tournament, but the players persevered, and then were treated to clear skies for the second half of the tournament.

"You get to see you're not alone," said Hernan Santiago, a member of the Knuckle Busters whose mother was recently diagnosed with early-onset Alzheimer's. "All the other people that are here, that might not have a personal connection to it — it's that many more people now that are more aware of this. God forbid it happens to them, but now they'll know they're not alone. You start learning about resources like CaringKind that really do exist. Seeing everyone come out, play overnight, give up their sleep time, their rest after working all day — it's heartwarming."

As dawn approached and the sun rose, the Hastings-based Yellow Jackets emerged victorious in the championship game, besting Santiago's Knuckle Busters for the tournament trophy. Off the field, the tournament hosts experienced a different kind of victory.

According to CaringKind, it expected to meet its goal of raising \$10,000 through donations and the handful of ongoing silent auctions. All proceeds will support programs for dementia caregivers at CaringKind and the Hebrew Home at Riverdale. Between raising awareness for Alzheimer's, fundraising for charity, and having



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Irvington Mayor Brian Smith throws out the first pitch.

fun, Pomeranz declared it a mission accomplished.

"We have a lot of people that came out to have a good time," he said. "That tells me they care. People are looking

for ways to care, especially in the challenging times that we're in. It tells me that maybe next year, we can probably have twice as many teams and do it for twice as long."