



PHOTO BY STEVE FFOST

Ellen Leondis, center, is congratulated after finishing her swim in honor of her daughter Stacey.

Swim honors cancer victim's life, legacy

BY ALI EAVES

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When Stacey Leondis died of cancer at the age of 23, she left behind a to-do list of places she wanted to see and things she wished to learn.

She also left behind a mission: to support research aimed at finding a cure.

Three years after her death, four dozen family members and friends took up her cause yesterday, participating in the annual Sound to the Cove Swim in Glen Cove.

They were among the 190 swimmers and 60 kayakers who took to the water for charity, said event organizer Gerry Oakes.

Among yesterday's swim, The Hamptons Swim on July 2 and several pool swims this summer in Nassau and Suffolk counties, the sponsoring Swim Across America organization has raised about \$600,000, he said.

All of the money goes to cancer research, Oakes said, including a fellowship in Leondis' name at The Children's Hospital at Montefiore.

When Leondis was diagnosed with bone cancer in 2001, she



Stacey Leondis died in 2008

was 16, a sophomore at Garden City High School, said her father, Joseph Leondis, 56, of Garden City. She started a fundraising nonprofit called The Foster Foundation and went on to Yale University, where she studied medicine.

"What she really wanted to do was help people," her father said.

Stacey Leondis graduated from Yale in 2008 and was about to enroll at Mount Sinai School of Medicine when she died that July.

"The pain is constant," said her mother, Ellen Leondis, 50. "But if we can help other people, then that's what we're

gonna do. We're following Stacey."

Huntington native Tom Finnegan swam a mile yesterday in honor of his brother, Michael, who died of melanoma in 1994.

Finnegan said he keeps a list of people he knows who have had cancer, have died of cancer or know someone with cancer.

"My motivation is simply reading that list," said Finnegan, who now lives in Manhattan. "The pain that an athlete feels is nothing compared to the pain that a cancer patient can feel."

Just out of the water at the finish line at Morgan Memorial Park, David Turkheimer, 51, of East Meadow, was exhausted.

"But it's for a great cause," said Turkheimer, who works in stem-cell research. "I'm personally doing it for friends that have died of cancer. Unfortunately I've had too many to even name."

The swim is a reflective time for many participants.

"When I'm in the water, the entire time I'm just thinking about Stacey," said Sherry Wang, 26, a college friend who is from Stony Brook. "It's rare that I get to spend a whole 30 minutes just thinking about her. It's almost meditative."