



## **Local Celebrities and Businesses Unite in Support of Easter Seals New Jersey's "Walk With Me & 5K Run" Fundraiser**

*Event raises nearly \$150,000 to benefit thousands of people with disabilities and special needs in New Jersey*

Thanks to the support of local celebrities and businesses, and the attendance of over 1,400 event participants, nearly \$150,000 was raised at Easter Seals New Jersey's 5th Annual Walk With Me & 5K Run at MetLife Stadium. Funds raised help Easter Seals to provide over 7,000 individuals and families with disabilities and special needs in New Jersey with various services that range from adult day programs, accessible camping and recreation, employment, mental health services and more.

The event was kicked off by News12 NJ Anchor Bryan Jenkins who thanked everyone for their support and helping to raise awareness that twenty percent of the US population lives with a disability today, like autism which has become a significant issue for many families. The national anthem was sung by this year's Miss New Jersey, Cara McCullom, who also spent the day posing for photographs with guests and signing autographs. Cheerleaders from Mary Help of Christians Academy in North Haledon choreographed an opening cheer routine specifically designed to honor people with disabilities at Easter Seals, followed by leading hundreds of walkers on the course. Joe Ruback, NY Giants super-fan who is better known as "License Plate Guy", led the 5K runners for the third consecutive year and also spent the day posing for photographs and signing autographs with guests. Football players from Kean University assisted with kids on-field activities. Additional special guests included D2W Wrestlers and musical groups Monterey and The Flame, a band entirely comprised of members with various disabilities.

"I had such an amazing experience at the event today," shared Julia, one of the cheerleaders at Mary Help of Christians Academy. "I loved it and I can't wait to come back next year."

Other notable supporters of this year's event originated from a chance meeting between strangers Eric Kunkel and Blogger mom Shanell Moulard on a Canadian-bound airplane several months ago. Moulard was worried that the behavior of her 3-year-old daughter Kate, who has autism, might make the flight uncomfortable for their seat mate, but the gracious and patient attitude of the stranger led little Kate to begin calling him "daddy" for the entire flight. Moulard was so appreciative, in fact, that she took to the internet to sing the stranger's praises in an open letter that went viral, and the story was broadcast across tri-state news outlets. This led to the reuniting of the kind stranger – who turned out to be Easter Seals NJ Board member, Erik Kunkel – and the Moulard family. Upon learning of the upcoming Easter Seals NJ Walk With Me fundraising event, the Moulard's formed their own fundraising team in Canada and flew in to participate in the event alongside Eric to support others with disabilities.

"This year's event was a huge success," says Brian Fitzgerald, ceo and president of Easter Seals New Jersey. "We not only reached our goal and raised critical funds for our programs and services but we had a great showing of support from the community and our sponsors."

Local event sponsors included MetLife Stadium, 92.3 NOW FM, 98.7 ESPN FM, 1450 WCTC AM Talk Radio, Star 99.1 FM, Britt World-Wide Charities, Robert Half International, BeyondPay, Kevin Paccione, KPMG, Lamb Financial Group, MetLife Foundation, Audience Pleasers, Bald Eagle Pharmacy, Bressler, Amery & Ross, P.C., Cement & Concrete Workers of NY, CarePoint Health Systems, Dave's Suburban



Disposal, Line Systems, Merrill Lynch/RVH Group, National Equipment Rental, New Concepts Leasing, NJM Insurance, Phyl's Fund, Sound Connection Entertainment, TD Bank, Value City Furniture, Village Office Supply, Winsor Staffing Temps Inc., Camp America, Crossfit KOA of Cranford, Dall Holdings, Harry Tracy, Lox Consulting Associates, Mercer Health & Benefits, and Toshiba Business Solutions.

“Easter Seals believes everyone has a valuable contribution to make to their community. Individuals with disabilities deserve our support in overcoming obstacles to full community inclusion,” said Fitzgerald. “Our programs and services seek to enrich the quality of life for people with developmental disabilities, mental illness, or other special needs by providing opportunities to live, learn, work and play in their communities with equality, dignity and independence.”

#### About Easter Seals New Jersey:

Easter Seals New Jersey has helped individuals and families with disabilities or special needs to live, learn, work and play in their communities with equality, dignity and independence since 1948. Annually, over 7,000 people in New Jersey with developmental disabilities including autism, physical disabilities, mental illness and other special needs receive services in our programs designed to help them work toward achieving independence and full community-integration. For more information on Easter Seals New Jersey and its statewide disability services, please contact 732-257-6662 or visit <http://www.eastersealsnj.org> or <http://www.facebook.com/eastersealsnj>.

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