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A GOOD CITIZEN IS A WELL-READ CITIZEN

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One Dollar

GHS Crew Teams Continue 'Pulling for Pulse'

Cardiovascular diseases and stroke are the No. 1 causes of death in Connecticut.

That sobering statistic is one reason the Glastonbury High School boys and girls crew teams are spearheading a multi-faceted fundraising and community awareness campaign called Pulling for Pulse.

There are also other, more personal reasons for their efforts: a GHS crew coach, sophomore rower and team parent are all living with heart disease.

Pulling for Pulse was first envisioned and created back in 2015 by Julia Boll (who was a team captain and rower on the GHS team at the time, and is now a sophomore at Northeastern), her mother Ginger Crawford and Julia's teammate, Shawn Perry.

The crew team raises money through the Pulling for Pulse campaign in a variety of ways. Recently, team members hauled away Christmas trees, worked with MexiPho to contribute proceeds from lunch and dinner purchases and sold Valentine's Day cookie bouquets at the high school.

Future events include "Hire an Oarsman" and other events in conjunction with local businesses. Pulling for Pulse organizer Mary Jo Ferraro says their biggest fundraiser to date has

been the solicitation from individuals and businesses to honor someone living with or deceased from heart disease. The team adds the name to one of the team's racing shells for a contribution of \$300. Corporations may also donate undisclosed amounts for different levels of visibility.

Julia said the concept for the fundraising committee was born out of losing her grandparents to the disease and the fact that her mother, Ginger, also has a heart condition that requires monitoring.

"My grandfather passed away from arteriosclerosis long before I was born and my other grandfather passed from a stroke in 2016," she said. "I know that there are many other families with this history regarding heart disease, so it means a lot that Pulling for Pulse is proactively contributing towards education in CPR, AED use and heart safety."

An AED is an "automated external defibrillator," which is a portable device that checks heart rhythm and can send an electric shock to the heart to try to restore a normal rhythm during sudden cardiac arrest.

The Pulling for Pulse fundraiser donates 25 percent of funds raised to heart health initia-

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Shown above are coaches, parents and athletes of the Glastonbury High School crew teams, all of whom are living with various forms of heart disease. Left to right are boys head coach Steve Somosky, who lives with atrial fibrillation; Amy LeLasher, who survived an aortic aneurism; Mary Jo Ferraro, chair of Pulling for Pulse and mother to Luke Ferraro (right) who is living with Long QT Syndrome.

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tives. In its first year, the team presented a check for \$1,000 to the American Heart Association, in addition to installing an AED at the Glastonbury Boathouse.

A second AED travels with the team on away regattas and a CPR dummy and practice AED were purchased for training. Additionally, the fundraiser has supported free heart health programming in the community.

The torch was passed in 2017 to Mary Jo Ferraro, who currently chairs the Pulling for Pulse drive for the GHS crew teams. Ferraro felt compelled to become involved because her son Luke, a sophomore rower on the boys' team, has lived with Long QT Syndrome since his diagnosis in 2011.

Long QT is a genetic disease that causes the electrical system of the heart to malfunction. It can cause dizziness, fainting, seizures, arrhythmias and even sudden death. Ferraro's daughter, Hannah, also has the disease (she is a freshman at Eckerd College in Florida).

"I used to think heart disease mainly affected the elderly — until those fateful days in 2011 when both my children were diagnosed," she said. "In the early days of our exposure to this disease, exercise was thought to be a trigger, but thanks to ongoing research and the latest in medications and treatments, my kids can exercise."

She continued, "I believe God has a plan for everyone and He put us with the crew team for a reason. Who knew we would be able to be part of a committee (Pulling for Pulse) that was so close to our hearts, literally? And Luke, who initially didn't want anyone to know what he had, is now comfortable sharing his story, has a coach he can confide in (GHS boys crew coach Steve Somosky) and he has teammates that don't think twice about the AED that follows him around."

Ferraro concluded, "As a mother, I could not be more proud every time I see his boat row by during a regatta, knowing just a few years earlier he wasn't allowed to participate in competitive sports. I guess I am paying it forward now by telling our stories, to show heart disease does not discriminate by age. And I know we can make a difference for others through our Pulling for Pulse campaign."

Somosky, who has coached the boys team

for six years, was diagnosed with atrial fibrillation in his mid-30s. The condition, in which the heart's upper chambers beat out of coordination with the lower chambers, causes symptoms including palpitations, shortness of breath and fatigue.

Treatments include drugs, electrical shock (cardioversion) and minimally invasive surgery (ablation) — all of which Somosky has endured in an effort to get his heart back into normal rhythm.

"If left unchecked, this disease can lead to stroke," said Somosky. "For a long time, I didn't let most people on the crew team know what I was dealing with," he recalled.

"But participating in Pulling for Pulse, and knowing that one of my athletes (Luke Ferraro) is dealing with his own heart disease, made me realize it was time to be open about my own struggles if it could help us raise money for this cause," he added. "Sometimes putting a face to a disease brings it home in a way that just seeing a commercial on TV cannot."

Amy LeLasher, whose daughter Katie is a sophomore rower for the girls team, is co-chair of the Pulse committee along with Ferraro. She was aware that she had a heart murmur, but it never required medication or care. However, after two bouts of pneumonia, her doctor sent her to a cardio-thoracic surgeon to be evaluated for an aortic aneurism.

"Talk about scary!" recalled LeLasher. "Eight months later, I was operated on and deemed to be in a very critical state, according to my surgeon. Luckily, I had a successful open heart surgery and a mechanical valve installed," she added. "Six months later, my sister had the same surgery with the same surgeon and a mechanical valve installed. I was 44 and she was 41 at the time of our respective surgeries."

LeLasher added that the fundraising drive is personal for her. "Last spring, we christened a new shell (boat) for the GHS girls team that was funded by our efforts with Pulling for Pulse," she continued. "Every time I see it being brought down to the water for a race, I look at the names of persons who have won and who have lost their battles with heart disease painted on the sides of the shell, and I feel renewed in my efforts to make sure that the Pulling for Pulse drive continues to positively impact lives

for years to come."

"All our fundraisers for the crew teams — including Pulling for Pride and Pulling for Pink — were created to help the GHS crew teams raise money to purchase new boats and equipment," said Crawford.

"But coaches, parents and volunteers always felt that, simultaneously, we wanted to give back to the community and make a difference," said Ferraro. "The Pride fundraiser has given thousands of dollars to veterans' causes over

the years and the Pink fundraiser has done the same for the American Cancer Society. With Pulse, our newest drive, we hope to exceed those numbers in dollars donated, while simultaneously creating an awareness in our community about heart health awareness."

For more information on how you can donate or become involved in Pulling for Pulse, please contact Ferraro at maryjo.ferraro@cox.net.