



Turkish cuisine in Port Washington. Dining Out, G19

# Our Towns

A GIVING HEART

## How John helped Jackson

The easy bond of swim teacher and autistic boy inspires a tale to buoy souls

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When Michele Iallonardi heard about half-priced swimming lessons for children with autism, she was skeptical they would work for her son.

Jackson, who was 3 at the time and in the early stages of his autism diagnosis, was "a disaster," said his mother, 34, in a recent interview at their Hauppauge home.

Jackson had yet to say his first word, didn't interact with other children and cried in unfamiliar settings. He was receiving 40 hours of therapy a week, yet Iallonardi said her son was still severely impaired.

But ever hopeful, Iallonardi said, she enrolled Jackson in six, half-hour, one-on-one swim classes for \$75 at Saf-T-Swim in Bohemia. "I'm never going to see what happens if I don't do it," she said.

What happened was a surprising but too brief experience for Jackson, a connection that inspired Iallonardi to write a story for the most recent book in the motivational series "Chicken Soup for the Soul."

She expected the instructor would be a seasoned autism specialist, or at least someone trained to work with children with special needs.

Instead, when she arrived for Jackson's first lesson in the fall of 2004, she met John Karl, a Stony Brook University freshman from Hauppauge with no special-needs training. "Oh, my God," Iallonardi remembers thinking. "This is a mistake."

She explained Jackson's autism to Karl, 18, who she said smiled broadly and reassured her. And to Iallonardi's great surprise, Jackson didn't cry in the arms of the stranger. "He was happy," Iallonardi said.

Over the next several months — Iallonardi and her husband, Ralph, extended their son's les-



Michele Iallonardi wrote about her son Jackson and the special connection he had with his swimming instructor, John Karl, for the "Chicken Soup for the Soul" series.

sons — Jackson learned to jump into the pool, kick his legs and close his mouth underwater. He became stronger, more confident and more comfortable around other children, his mother said.

"That was the only half-hour

of his week when he was just like everyone else," she said.

Her son's connection with Karl was stunning, Iallonardi said, at a time when even she and her husband had difficulty finding mutual enjoyment with Jackson.

Iallonardi attributed their easy bond to Karl's natural way of playing with Jackson. "People don't know how to act around kids with disabilities," she said, "and he didn't have that."

See SON on G17

HEMPSTEAD EDITION



Blanket of love

Celia Minieri of Roslyn recalls how she met her husband, Richard, on the beach at Coney Island. He was looking for a baseball score, and left with her address.

Love Story, G13



Honored

Emma Gugerty, a seventh-grader at Locust Valley Middle School, is a winner in the New York State Archives' Students Research Competition for her multimedia project, "The Bayville Bridge."

Way to Go, G16



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