

# L Dimensions of living

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## Remember beloved teacher

Community gathers June 2 for annual Mike's Hike run, walk

By MICHELLE CENTAMORE

In April 2011, Accomsett Elementary School teacher Michael Denaro was hiking alone along the Greenbelt Trail and sadly suffered a heart attack. It was spring break. When school was back in session, staff and students at the school, as well as the community were devastated to learn that their beloved teacher had passed away. In an effort to honor and remember Mr. Denaro, Accomsett Elementary School partnered with the Smithtown Children's Foundation, an organization dedicated to providing financial and emotional support to children and families in need in the Smithtown community, to organize a 4K Run/2K Walk.

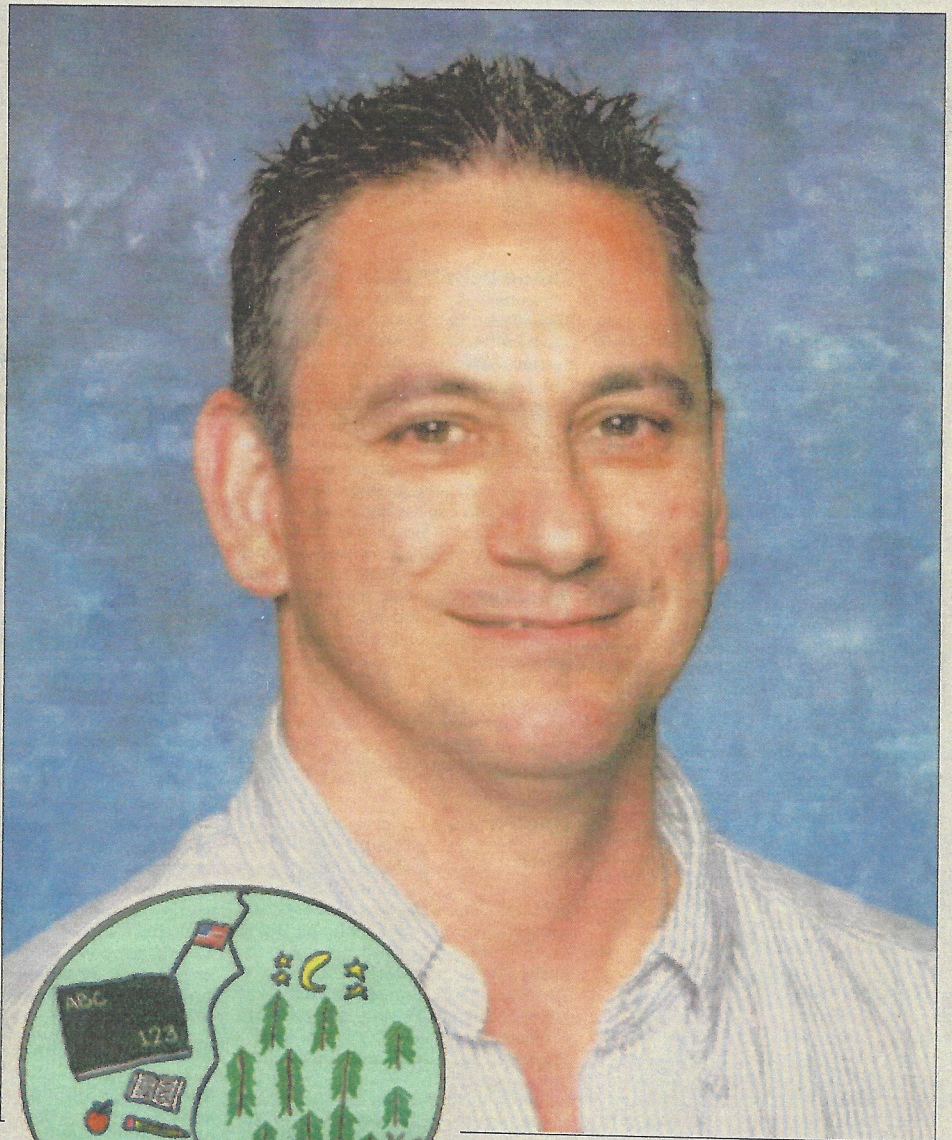
The Third Annual Mike's Hike will take place Sunday, June 2 at the Smithtown High School West track. Check-in for the event is at 8:30 a.m. Funds raised will support two Mike's Hike Science Scholarships, which will be awarded to two Smithtown seniors. Additional money raised will go to support the Smithtown Children's Foundation.

"Mike Denaro was a wonderful colleague and friend," said Kristine Lonetto, a first grade teacher at Accomsett Elementary School and organizer of the annual Mike's Hike fundraiser. She described Mr. Denaro as a "jack-of-all-trades," constantly revealing his passion and skills for astrology, gardening, wood carving, hiking, blue grass music and more. It was Mr. Denaro's enthusiasm and dedication for educating his students and imparting a love of life and learning to them, as well as his colleagues, that made him such a unique treasure and asset to the school and community.

"He was one of those teachers who delivered his instruction in ways that his students would remember for years to come... even if it meant taking the time to gather with them at off hours to do things like going on an owl watch," Ms. Lonetto said. "Mike loved nature, but he loved teaching his students about respecting nature and caring for the environment even more. He had an excellent relationship with his students. They respected him, yet he could joke around with them and make learning fun."

Marieke Mygland, a second grade teacher at Accomsett Elementary School also enjoyed Mr. Denaro's enthusiasm and sense of humor, as well as his appreciation for the environment. "He was across the hall from me and was always cracking jokes in our hallway," recalled Ms. Mygland. "It must have

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The Third Annual Mike's Hike, in memory of Accomsett Elementary School teacher Michael Denaro, will be held this Sunday, June 2.



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been hard to do because he worked with all women. He was kind, helpful and always chivalrous to all of us ladies." In addition, the students responded well to Mr. Denaro in many ways, she said. "His love of nature spilled not only into his classroom - and onto the classroom walls - but outside of the classroom, too. He was able to get his children to connect with nature... something that's hard to do these days. He was full of the most random information about plants, trees, flowers, weather and animals."

Following the death of Mr. Denaro, there was a "void in the halls," recalled Ms. Mygland. "Three years later we still find ourselves saying 'Mike would have loved that,'" said Ms. Mygland. "When the killdeer plover nested in the parking lot of our school, we had wished he was around to tell us what the bird was and what we should do without the research we had to do to figure it out... he would have known in an instant," she said.

The sudden loss of Mr. Denaro in the spring of 2011 was a shock to all, but for the students especially, it seemed to be a harsh and premature lesson on life and death. "They found out that he had passed away and were faced with the reality of the mortality of the adults in their lives... something we hope that children will not have to understand at such a young age," said Ms. Lonetto.

Providing the students with a "sense of closure" was the initial goal and inspiration for Mike's Hike, explained Ms. Lonetto. "Those students who

were taught by Mike needed to feel involved in memorializing him, but in an age-appropriate and positive way. An event in Mike's Memory that encouraged students to be physically active and that raised money for the community Mike loved seemed like the perfect answer," she said.

"Mike's Hike allows us to help heal hearts and memorialize loved ones, even those who maybe did not live in the town but who impacted our children," said Chris Fitzgerald, executive director of the Smithtown Children's Foundation. The logo for the event was created by one of Mr. Denaro's students the year he passed away, noted Ms. Fitzgerald... "a testament to all that he stood for - from the mind of a second grader."

The Mike's Hike fundraising event includes opportunities for individuals of all ages and abilities to participate. The children's fun run starts at 9:40 a.m.; the runner's race starts at 10 a.m.; and the 2k family walk starts at 10:15 a.m. Entry fee includes a t-shirt and bag for the first 500 participants. Registration fees are \$20 pre-registration (by May 31), \$25 day of the race and \$10 children's one lap fun run. The event will include music, refreshments and more. An awards ceremony will be held on the football field immediately following the event.

For additional information and online registration, contact Krissy Lonetto at [klonetto@smithtown.k12.ny.us](mailto:klonetto@smithtown.k12.ny.us) or visit the Smithtown Children's Foundation at [www.smithtownchildrensfoundation.com](http://www.smithtownchildrensfoundation.com).