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Special Compass lends helping hand



By Gary Curreri

With his son Michael unable to participate in mainstream athletics due to cerebral palsy, Jim Sayih sought out other options.

Sayih, 58, founded Special Compass, a non-profit group that provides life-changing experiences for the “differently abled” by promoting inclusion in the community using athletic events and building opportunities for independent living.

“I saw a need for people with disabilities to be included in all sports,” said Sayih, who recruited 52 athletes for the recent Palm Beaches Spartan Race, eight of whom were “differently abled” athletes.

“This passion has enabled my disabled son to start his first race at the age of 5 and has been racing ‘til this day at age 28,” added Sayih, who is also the executive director of Special Compass. “Inclusion has more benefits than just competing with others, it creates friendship, builds self-esteem, confidence and community.”

The Palm Beaches Spartan Race at Burt Aaronson South County Regional Park in Boca Raton attracted approximately 3,500 participants from across the United States.

Sayih said Special Compass received its non-profit status in 2015 but has been doing events informally since 2010. Special Compass enlisted 50 volunteers to help eight participants get through the obstacles of the Spartan Race. Among the obstacles were a barb wire crawl, cargo net climb and an 8-foot wall.

Sayih said everyone on their team crossed the finish line at the Spartan Race safely and added more medals to their collection of races.

“Even more importantly,” Sayih



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Race

from Page 1

said, “our special buddies added a new layer of confidence and courage to face life with purpose and excitement. The event was a huge success.”

Boca Raton’s Darrin Carlomagno, 43, was one of four captains in the event and is a board member with Special Compass.

“I got involved with Special Compass after volunteering for a Spartan Race in Mulberry a few years back,” Carlomagno said. He was in charge of the “stairway to Sparta” obstacle, a 20 foot vertical climb that would be hard for any athlete.

“All of a sudden, I heard cheering from the woods and competing runners stop to cheer team Special Compass,” he continued. “I was elated, to say the least, and thought they would go around as many healthy athletes had done prior but oh no, they proceeded to strap the differently abled athletes to their back and carry them over the obstacle. I cried my eyes out in



The foundation Special Compass enlisted 50 volunteers to help eight disabled participants get through the obstacles of the Spartan Race at Boca Raton’s South County Regional Park. **PHOTOS: MARTA MIKULAN MARTIN/CONTRIBUTOR**

utter disbelief to what I was witnessing.”

“It’s been an unbelievable journey,” added Carlomagno, who fractured a couple of vertebrae back in 2006 and was in a wheelchair for most of five years, a walker and then a cane for another several years.

“I am beyond grateful to now do what I do for others,” he said, “especially knowing in some small way how each of our buddies feels and dreams of doing.”

Scott Garver, 54, of

Boca Raton, is also a board member of Special Compass. He said he met Jim Sayih about five years ago through a mutual friend and they struck a friendship. They are both veterans.

“I got involved by Jim asking me if I wanted to be a Power Buddy in a 5K,” Garver said. “Since that day, I have been doing 5Ks, half-marathons, triathlons and Spartan Races as a power buddy as well as helping coordinate races and giving race day support.”

It marked the second time that Special Compass had assisted during a Spartan Race. They also helped during a Spartan Race in Jacksonville on Feb. 28 with four athletes.

Before that event, the foundation also completed an adaptive makeover on Jan. 23 for Jessika and Renaldo Maiz, a married couple who are confined to wheelchairs.

During the renovation, Special Compass expanded their bedroom and built a patio and fence so that they will have more freedom in their Sunrise home. Working on the project, more than 30 volunteers came out in support to underwrite the labor costs.

“Serving others with meaningful purpose is a drive like no other,” Sayih said. “Every event we do, every life we impact, grows our community like a Forrest of positive energy. Fulfillment here is indefinite.”

Visit specialcompass.org.

—Gary Curreri is a South Florida Community News correspondent.