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Local student spurs charity reading drive

By PAT BLAIS
Staff Writer

South School students will champion the less fortunate over the next three weeks by enduring a mental marathon of sorts.

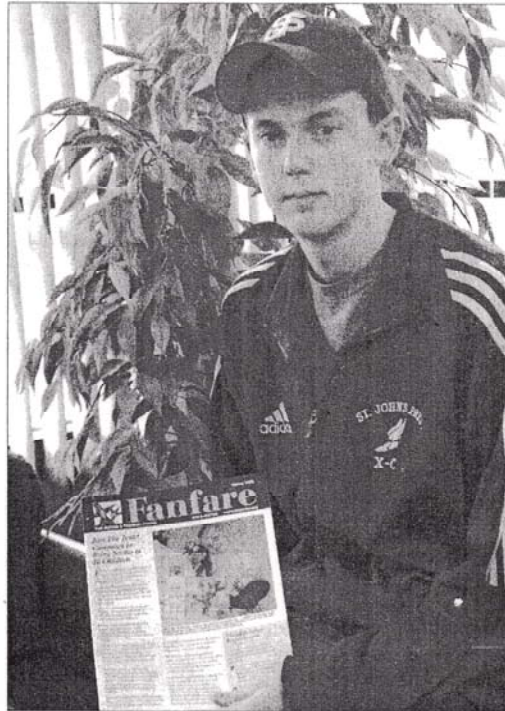
According to South School Principal Nick Leonardos, each child in the elementary facility will attempt to read 1,000 pages or more by April 7 as part of the educational community's annual read-athon.

However, unlike previous years where prizes were awarded to students who excel at the challenge, those participating in the read-athon will raise funding for the Children's Hospital in Boston - particularly by purchasing a special children's book from the California-based Jester and Pharley Phund.

"They're excited about this and it's a great way to connect the kids with the outside world," the principal said. "It really gets them to think about others."

"We read 49,000 pages as a school last week, so we're well along here. And if each child reads 1000 pages and also brings in \$10, we'll be able to purchase 370 copies of this book for a child," Leonardos explained.

According to the South School Principal, he had never heard about the Jester and Pharley fund until Stoneham native Jared Katz, a former graduate of the neighborhood school, approached him last September on the first day of school.



GETTING INVOLVED Stoneham resident and St. John's Prep student Jared Katz has gotten involved with the South School students to read to raise money for cancer patients.

PHOTO BY WWW.CHINAPPI.COM

Energized by a recent leadership camp he had attended over the summer, the current St. John's Preparatory High School sophomore proposed a fundraising campaign where the students would receive pledges for the amount of pages they consumed during the read-athon.

"I loved it. I had never heard of [the charity before], but he said he had spent some time learning about the Jester and Pharley Fund," Leonardos

recalled. "I can't say enough about Jared. He had a great idea and came to me to talk about it. And he certainly has a lot of poise and character."

Explaining the reasoning behind his fundraising idea, Katz recalled reading the children's tale during his summer experience.

Being touched by the message behind the tale, the Lincoln Street resident thought a direct fundraiser would be a great way for the South School stu-

dents to raise money for seriously-ill cancer patients directly.

"The whole plot line is that there's a court jester and one day he just can't get anybody to laugh. And the king gets angry and banishes him from the kingdom. So the jester goes on this search for laughter and he ends up finding it in a young cancer patient," Katz explained.

"He realizes that [laughter] is something that's inside all of us," the high school sophomore added, saying the book was written by California native David Saltzman. "And I just thought that instead of just raising money for cancer research, this was an opportunity to give money to the kids directly."

After first meeting with Leonardos this September, Katz began organizing the efforts behind the fundraiser, contacting Children's Hospital to receive the authorization to collect the money on its behalf.

With that permission in place, the driven Stoneham native then traveled to the South School last week for a "South School Read-athon Energizer" assembly in which he pitched the importance of the task to the students.

"The catch phrase of the book is, 'it's up to us to make a difference and care.' And that's the inspiration for the kids, that if we don't help now, who's going to?" said Katz.

"This is a town-wide effort. If people want to donate they can. The South School would just ask and appreciate it if they could put the [donation] in an envelope with the amount written right on it."