

Support boat sinks, but benefit swimmers do just fine

By ALAN GOTTLIEB
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A swim across Long Island Sound to raise money for cancer treatment almost had a tragic beginning Saturday morning, when a 28-foot boat carrying family and friends of the swimmers and a film crew sank in rough seas near Port Jefferson, N.Y., with nine people aboard.

All nine were quickly rescued by swimmers and support crew, and the swim went on as scheduled.

"It was like the Titanic, it was amazing," said Andy Small, a crew member of another support boat who helped fish the soggy but uninjured boaters from the water. "It was rough out there and it just got swamped, and went down in a couple of minutes."

Bernard Gilhuly, another rescuer, said no one was hurt but "a camera man almost got in trouble because he refused to let go of his video camera." The camera crew was from News 12, a cable station.

The boat, owned by Dennis Auray of Norwalk, sank in 100 feet of water.

Despite the shaky start, the event, Swim Across the Sound, was viewed as a rousing success by organizers and participants. Swimmers took turns swimming one-mile lengths, and covered the 17 miles between Port Jefferson and Black Rock Harbor in about five hours.



Sunday Post/Russ Decker

Jeff Keith, center, who lost a leg to cancer, is surrounded by friends in Black Rock Harbor.

Best known among the swimmers was Jeff Keith, who lost a leg to cancer in 1974, when he was 12.

Keith ran across the U.S. in 1984-85, using an artificial leg, to prove that disabilities don't have to be debilitating.

Cynthia "Sippy" Woodhead, who won a silver medal for swimming in the 1984 Olympic Games, also participated in the swim.

Swim Across the Sound was organized by Bridgeport resident Matthew Vossler, a life-long friend of Keith's who participated in the cross-country run. A triathlete, he also swam Saturday.

Vossler, who is active in the St. Vincent's Medical Center Community Volunteer Association, said he dreamed up the swim as a way of raising money for the medical cen-

ter's cancer unit.

Vossler said he hoped the swim would raise \$20,000 for the cancer unit. As of Saturday, organizers said about \$5,000 had come in. Joan Hackett, one of the organizers, said she expected the total to reach about \$10,000.

"This thing has only been in the works about a month and a half," Vossler said. "We only got serious

about it three weeks ago."

Both Keith and Vossler said they plan to make the swim an annual event, one that will act as a significant funding source for the cancer unit.

Swimmers Saturday said rough waters near Port Jefferson made the going a bit slow at first. But they said they experienced no problems, and did not appear tired when they arrived at Captain's Cove Marina just after 3 p.m.

"Let's turn around and do it again," Keith said as he was hoisted onto a support boat.

"With Sippy swimming those miles in under 20 minutes, we really made time," Vossler said.

About 200 people greeted the swimmers as they pulled into the marina under a bright afternoon sun. The area was festooned with blue and white balloons. Cannon fire from the H.M.S. Rose boomed across the harbor, welcoming the swimmers to land.

"We did this to raise money for the cancer unit, and to send an important message," Keith told a group of reporters on the marina dock. "Regardless of your handicap, you can do whatever you want — ride a bike, swim, run."

Other swimmers Saturday included Chris Vossler, Jack Salerno, Pamela Dey, James E. Walker III, and Colleen Brennan. All are either triathletes or experienced open-water swimmers.