

Heart-Screening Program at ESM

By Jennett Meriden Russell

Richard Perez does not believe he has heart disease—but at the same time, the 17-year-old Manorville resident doesn't want to take any chances.

He and approximately 90 other students in the Eastport South Manor School District have already signed up for a unique preventative heart-screening program for kids that could possibly save their lives.

Conducted by HeartScreen America Inc., the program, which is being hosted by the ESM Athletic Booster Club, will take place at the Eastport South Manor Junior-Senior High School on Saturday, December 1, from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., and on Sunday, December 2, from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. The program consists of a simple, painless, non-invasive test called the electrocardiogram (ECG or EKG), a family and personal heart health questionnaire, blood pressure reading and body mass index (BMI) calculation. The screening takes about 10 minutes.

"My father received an e-mail from the school encouraging all athletes to get a heart screening," said Richard, a varsity cross country runner and lacrosse goalie at the school. "I'm an athlete, and it is a big part of what I do. So, if there is anything wrong with my heart, I thought, 'Let's go for the screening to be on the safe side.'"

Eastport South Manor is one of the first school districts on Long Island to offer the heart screening.

A board certified cardiologist will review the results of each EKG and send a final report to the participants' homes seven to 10 days after testing.

Amy Agnesini, athletic director for the school district, said that all test results will be strictly confidential, and will be seen only by the students and their parents or guardians. The school district will not be given the results, and will have no record of the HeartScreen findings.

Although focused on students, the screening is open to all community members 6 years old and older. The number of screenings performed will be capped at approximately 250.

Ms. Agnesini stressed that not only young athletes should sign up for the program. "Kids playing chess can have heart disease too," she said. "It isn't restricted to just athletes."

Pre-registration is required by Wednesday, November 28, and must be made directly with HeartScreen America at www.HeartScreenAmerica.com or at (866) 722-8008.

Ms. Agnesini said the service provided can typically cost between \$500 and \$800 at outpatient facilities. Health insurance companies generally will not cover the test unless a young person exhibits symptoms of a heart problem.

HeartScreen America typically offers the test for \$49 for children. However, the screenings at Eastport South Manor will cost only \$30 each, thanks to monetary support from the Louis Acompora Foundation, the Robbie Levine Foundation, the Eastport-South Manor Sports Association, ESM Football Booster Club, ESM Boys and Girls Lacrosse Booster Clubs and the Manorville Soccer League. Additionally, the first 100 sports association members to register will receive a \$5 refund from the group.

Disturbing reports over the years of seemingly healthy children suddenly dying from undetected heart problems prompted the local screening.

Sudden cardiac death among children is extremely rare. According to the American Academy of Family Physicians, it kills 1 in 200,000 young people each year. Still, that translates to about 425 childhood deaths each month. One noted case on Long Island occurred in early 2000, when Louis Acompora, a 14-yearold goalie on the Northport High School junior varsity lacrosse team, was hit in the chest with a lacrosse ball and died. It turned out that he suffered from an undetected heart syndrome known as commotio cordis, which could have been discovered through a simple EKG test. Unfortunately, testing cannot entirely predict whether a child will experience sudden cardiac arrest, but Ms. Agnesini pointed said Eastport South Manor is prepared to deal with sudden cases. Automatic external defibrillators are located throughout the district and are always on hand at athletic events, she said.

She said school involvement in the local heart-screening program came after School Board member Janet Stevens volunteered at a similar HeartScreen testing at Northport High School in April. "If even one child's life is saved through early detection of heart problems," Ms. Stevens said, "our efforts will have been rewarded infinitely."



Eastport South Manor students Ashley Pellici, 13, Jessica Melodic, 13, Brooke Stevens,13, Rich Perez,17,and Danny Stevens,16,from left,have all signed up for a preventative heart screening in early December. The event is being sponsored by the ESM Athletic Booster Club. **JENNETT MERIDEN RUSSELL**