

# Riverdale resident with MS runs relay across America

BY KYLE VUILLE

Running 28 miles a day for five days straight would be feat for most people, let alone someone with an autoimmune disease.

On July 13, a Bronx woman will be running 141 miles over the course of five days to raise \$10,000 to spread awareness for multiple sclerosis.

Wilmien Blake, 41, of Riverdale, has always been an avid runner, but her whole life changed when she was diagnosed with MS in 2013.

"I remember I started feeling this tingling and numbness on my right side of my body," Blake said. "It felt like someone drew a line right down the middle of me."

Blake's initial concerns were about the disease's progression and how it would affect her life in the years to come.

After she started taking medication and treatment for MS, she said she wanted to block out the side effects because she didn't want her diagnosis to be the center of her life.

"I decided if MS was going to be a passenger in my life then I'm going to give it one hell of a ride,"

Blake said.

MS is an autoimmune disease, which affects the immune system so patients often get sick a lot, Blake explained.

However, Blake noted her new infusion treatment minimizes those effects.

"I realized how fortunate I was with my doctor, the medication and the treatment," Blake said. "I felt the obligation to help those who aren't as fortunate as I am, I wanted to show people that MS doesn't need to be this big, scary thing."

As an avid runner, Blake has ran marathons and other long distance races, but said she learned of the MS Runs the US at another event to raise money for MS.

"Last year, I was at this event, 'MS Climbs to the Top' and at that event, I learned about the relay race," Blake said.

MS Runs the US is an ultra relay race consisting of 19 runners starting from Santa Monica, CA and ends in New York City covering 3,100 miles.

Donations from the race will go towards MS research and help those with MS.

Blake has segment 15 of the relay assigned to her. Her five-day 141-mile journey will start in Valparaiso, IN and end in Van Wert, OH, averaging 28 miles a day.

In preparation of the race, Blake has found herself involved in all sorts of training besides running every day.

Her six month training program includes kickboxing, kettle ball training, rowing, swimming and other forms of cross training.

However, Blake still finds time for her family and her job in advertising.

Blake said she starts her day at 4 a.m. and hits the pavement before she gets her kids ready for school and out the door herself for work.

"It's the only time I have for myself," Blake joked.

Her two children, Zander, 12, and Lucy, 8, join in on her runs, trailing her on a scooter or bicycle while she teaches them about MS.

Blake said she finds herself very grateful for the support and love she receives from family and friends.



Wilmien Blakes gives the camera the thumbs up during The North Face Endurance Challenge this past June on Wachusett Mountain in Massachusetts. The 50 mile race was the longest race Blake has done since she has committed to the 141 mile 5 day MS Runs the US ultra relay race.

Photo courtesy of Ultra Race Photos

"I'd like to thank my husband, Phil, for his support, encouragement and for picking up my slack while I indulge my love for running," Blake said. "Also, my kids

and parents for being my biggest cheerleaders."

For more information and to make donations, please visit <https://www.msruntheus.org/>

# Bronx cultural organizations receive boost in funding

BY JASON COHEN

Culture and arts organizations in the borough received a financial boost as 2019 came to a close.

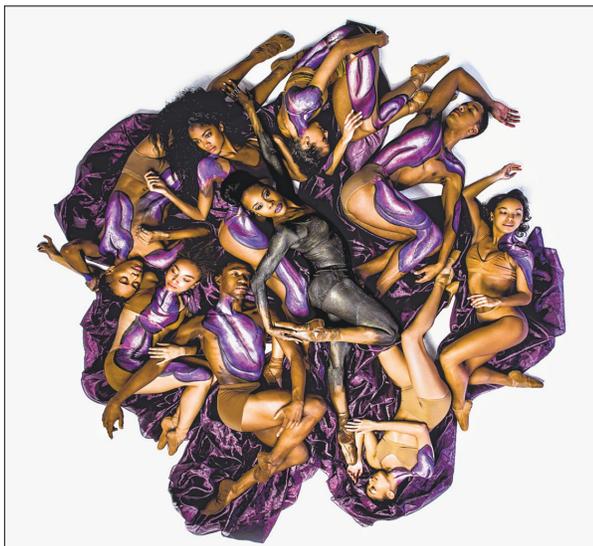
The NYC Department of Cultural Affairs recently announced \$51.3 million in grants to support cultural programming at 985 organizations as part of its 2020 annual funding cycle.

Some of the local organizations that received money were: Bronx Arts Ensemble, \$344,688, Bronx Children's Museum, \$35,800, Bronx Council on the Arts, \$298,120,

Bronx Documentary Center, \$139,020, Bronx House, Inc. \$93,020, Bronx Opera Company, \$71,800, Bronx River Alliance, \$24,560, Bronx River Art Center, Inc., \$181,700 and Bronx-ArtSpace, \$16,000.

"With additional grant funds from DCLA, we were able to fund more art community projects more fully," said Viviana Bianchi, executive director Bronx Council on the Arts.

"This increased funding will also allow us to award more BRIOs (Bronx Recognizes



Dancers in the Black Iris Project, which recently received grant money from the city.

Photo Courtesy Matthew Murphy

Its Own awards) to even more artists. We are very grateful for this increased support, and hope that funding continues at this level or higher in the years

ahead so that BCA can continue strengthening the cultural ecosystem of the Bronx," she added.

One of the recipients in the

borough was Jeremy McQueen, an award-winning choreographer, who started The Black Iris Project in 2016, which is a ballet that celebrates diversity and black history.

He won \$5,000 from Bronx Recognizes Its Own (BRIO), which provides support to artists who create works in the literary, media, visual and performing arts.

McQueen spoke to the Bronx Times about the money. The funds will help form the creation of a new ballet, The Storm, which centers on the disruption caused by tumultuous hurricanes that have taken place in the United States over the last 15 years and the Middle Passage.

"The Black Iris Project from its inception has been about creating movement within the Black community that has housed diversity, justice, equity and inclusion," McQueen said. "Communities of color are not often ones that can always afford or have access to high quality performing arts experiences. The work I do as an educator and choreographer

with The Black Iris Project has specifically made it possible for various communities of color to have access to live art and to see themselves in the art that is shared onstage as a source of inspiration."

Another winner was Ivan Velez Jr., a comic artist that received close to \$11,000 for three community engagement grants, "New Work," "Arts Fund" and "Community Arts" and an artist residency called Su-Casa. SU-CASA is a program that aims to enrich the lives of senior citizens through the arts.

This grant will help fund programming and events and provide art supplies, advertising, and financial support for larger events.

"I'm an individual artist who has used my grant funding mostly to support my art instruction programs and celebrations," Velez said. "I've also been able to create art events for the community where other artists can meet and create together, as well as inspire people who would not normally consider themselves artists to participate and create."

# HAPPY TO BE HERE?

Lawsuit to free Bronx Zoo elephant

See story on page 2

An animal rights group and the Bronx Zoo are in a legal battle over the future of Happy the Elephant.

Photo Courtesy Gigi Glendinning