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## 'Swim Team' documentary profiles young athletes on the autism spectrum

By Catherine Kauder



Photo provided

SEED, Lafayette's Special Education Enrichment Development Foundation, is hosting a free screening of "Swim Team," an award-winning feature documentary about a New Jersey YMCA-based community swim team made up of teens on the autism spectrum.

The film will be shown at 6 p.m. Friday, Jan. 26 at the Lafayette-Orinda Presbyterian Church, 49 Knox Dr. in Lafayette. A moderated discussion will follow the screening.

The moving 90-minute documentary chronicles the Jersey Hammerheads, a competitive swim team formed by the parents of a teenage boy on the autism spectrum.

The film follows three of the team's star swimmers over the course of year, giving a glimpse of the overwhelming struggles they face and the triumphs they achieve as

they strive for independence, inclusion and a life that feels like winning.

The athletes profiled are Mikey, the team's standout swimmer whose parents Mike and Maria lead the swim team with equal measures of patience and high expectations, Robbie, the team's leader and captain of his high school swim team whose mother is helping him come to terms with what it means to have autism, and Kelvin, a young adult who struggles with Tourette's and violent outbursts.

As we follow these young men's journeys, we also see a portrait of diverse families as they help their children transition into adulthood in a society where services and support for adults on the autism spectrum can be scarce, and many with this disability fall through the cracks.

Young adults with autism had lower employment rates and higher rates of complete social isolation than people with other disabilities, according to a 2015 report by the A.J. Drexel Autism Institute. New Jersey has the highest rate of autism in the United States - as of 2016, one out of every 41 children in the state was diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Filmmaker Lara Stolman said she was inspired to make the documentary after discovering the Jersey Hammerheads when she was looking for swim lessons for her own children.

"I was immediately struck by the energy and optimism of the families who were coming together to form the team. Some of the kids were teenagers and had never been on a sports team before. And some couldn't yet swim. But this team was determined to dominate the competition," she says.

The documentary has won many awards at film festivals across the country and premiered on PBS in October of last year. For more information about "Swim Team," visit: [www.swimteamthefilm.com](http://www.swimteamthefilm.com).

To register for the free screening of the documentary, go to:  
<https://events.r20.constantcontact.com/register/eventReg?oeidk=a07eeyashnz08330b00&oseq=&c=&ch=>

A limited number of spots for children's respite care are also available from 6-9 p.m. at LOPC. To register, please e-mail [dave@lopc.org](mailto:dave@lopc.org).

SEED provides a wide range of support and resources to families of children with special and diverse learning needs, as well as training programs for educators who work with these children. SEED funds programs such as recess facilitation, afterschool social skills play groups, educational seminars, teacher training and support groups and socials for parents and families. More information about SEED can be found at [www.seedlafayette.org](http://www.seedlafayette.org).

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