

Ithacans Accept Tough Turtle Challenge

By Olivia M. Hall

Ithaca has been gripped by Tough Turtle fever. Area gyms and social media are abuzz with talk about, and preparations for, the city's first adventure obstacle race on Saturday, April 20.

A diverse group of runners, ranging from serious athletes to first-timers, including families with children, snapped up the competition's 300 spots in less than a day, and another 300 openings that were added filled up almost as quickly. While most participants are local, some have registered from as far away as Rhode Island and Virginia, says Ray Weaver, the event's spokesman.

Starting in eight heats, the runners are raising funds for the Ithaca Children's Garden (ICG), after whose giant turtle mascot the race is named. Especially dedicated participants, dubbed FundRACERS, will vie for sponsored prizes by trying to collect the most donations for their entry fee instead of paying a flat rate.

The down-and-dirty race is the brainchild of Erin Martea, ICG's director, who had noticed the growing popularity of such well-known events as the Warrior Dash and Tough Mudder. Building on the experience of a community-based version, New Hampshire's Wason Pond Pounder, she quickly assembled an organizing team and many local sponsors.

"One thing we want to portray [in contrast to other races] is that this is Ithaca-based, created and directed by community members," Weaver says. Consequently, Cornell

Outdoor Education (COE) has designed the race's dozen obstacles to have a uniquely Ithaca character and be appropriate for a wide range of abilities.

For example, the 5K course along the Cayuga Waterfront and Black Diamond trails goes through a GreenStar-sponsored compost crawl, where similar races might feature mud crawls. Other activities are inspired by elements used at the COE's Hoffman Challenge Course, special programs coordinator Rob Cook explains.

Descriptions of the obstacles are being revealed bit by bit and, even then, remain cryptic in order "to keep some mystery and excitement around them," he says.

What participants should bring, in any case, is "mental and physical grit, humor, and ability to deal with wet socks, steep hills, mud and, possibly, rain and cold," Martea says.

"People just need to be prepared to step outside their comfort zone," Ray Weaver adds, "but we'll never push anyone beyond that. The opportunity is there to learn a little bit about yourself, mentally and physically."

First-time runner Michelle Jackson has learned a lot from preparing for the event's particular challenges. As part of a nine-person team from Palisade Corp.—an Ithaca-based software company sponsoring one of the Tough Turtle's obstacles—the marketing assistant has participated in training classes held at work as part of her employer's wellness program, in addition to running and walking on her own.

"I wanted to demonstrate to my



Photo by Andrew Sich

Palisade team members Erik Westwig and Randy Heffernan practicing step-ups on the Ithaca Children's Garden's turtle sculpture.

two eight-year-old children that it is okay to try something new, even if it is not within your comfort zone," she says. "And I wanted to prove to myself that I could do this. I have gained self-confidence, friendships, a healthier heart and the incredible feeling that I am truly leading by example in my kids' eyes."

Her colleague Erik Westwig, a Palisade software engineer, has taken advantage of the "Island Extreme" workouts offered by Island Health & Fitness, the Tough Turtle's title sponsor. "It seems like the type of stuff we do in class is pretty appropriate for the obstacle portion of the race," he says. "In fact, I have many friends in the class who enter these obstacle-course races frequently. There's lots of jumping, tire-flipping, ket-

tle-bell work, sprinting."

This kind of high-intensity, functional training worked well in preparing Myriah Fitterer for her first Warrior Dash last year, which the 24-year-old completed with four friends from her gym, Ultimate Athletics. "You really need upper-body strength to be able to push yourself over the obstacles," she says. "We also had to climb up a rope, and without upper-body strength, it would have been a lot more difficult," she says. But, she adds, runners often help each other, even if they are strangers. "During the race there's a lot of camaraderie."

Martea hopes participants will extend this positive spirit to the organizers as they pull the race

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Commons

Continued from page 1

Carey Building), currently owned by Ithaca businessman Frost Travis, now stands.

Seneca Way, a six-story residential and office building is under construction at the foot of East State Street in the space formerly occupied by Challenge Industries. On the Commons itself, building projects include "Harold's Square," a \$30 million-plus plan to build 60 semi-high-rise apartments atop two existing retail spaces. Across the plaza, the "Shalimar Building" will maintain two street-level shops while the upper floors are converted into five apartments, to the tune of \$500,000, funded through a loan from the Southern Tier Regional Economic Development Corp.

Crews started dismantling and moving the mall's four pavilions and signature art installations earlier this month. Many sculptures have been relegated to sites along South Cayuga Street. The beloved sculpture of the young woman sitting at a table is in storage and will be a feature of the new design.

The entire Commons corridor, including much of Bank Alley, will be leveled. Destined for landfills and compost heaps are the raised concrete planters, bushes and trees. The clock towers will be scrapped and replaced by more modest kiosks. The fate of the chess tables near the west end of the Commons is yet unknown. However, Ferguson says there is a salvage and re-use plan for many current fixtures.

For instance, an intensive study of the trees was conducted, and at least five of them will be replanted in Stewart Park. Some trees in Bank Alley will be spared the

chainsaw. The brick-and-rail installation in front of Center Ithaca will be removed, remodeled and returned to its site, sans metal rails, which proved treacherous when wet. The rails will be replaced with etched granite.

The Sagan Planet Walk installations will be removed, restored and returned to their original places in the cosmic scheme of things. A more flexible, upgraded Bernie Milton Pavilion will occupy the north end of Bank Alley.

Overall, the final design reveals a stripped-down open plaza more conducive to strolling and window-shopping than hanging out. For much of its recent existence, the bane of the outdoor mall has been groups of grungy disenfranchised youth and loiterers of all descriptions. On a very tacit level, city leaders have decided that the cure for this scourge is to swamp the downtown with monied residents and visitors.

However, public leaders remain stymied as to how to resolve the continued nuisance of empty, overpriced storefronts, owned largely by one local real-estate mogul. On that score, the hope seems to rest on the idea that, if the city rebuilds it, the merchants will come.

Those interested in the Commons rebuild can learn more about it by visiting the City of Ithaca website, or downtownithaca.com.

Robertson

Continued from page 1

lies. In all, since I've been on the IDA, we've brought in \$453 million in investments, 1.5 million square feet of new construction and 700 new jobs to our community. I've shown I can get things done, work-

ing across party lines and with all types of people.

TW: What are some of the issues you would work on if elected?

MR: Jobs and long-lasting economic development, funding for our schools and protecting Social Security and Medicare are my priorities. We need to find balanced solutions to our budget crisis without crippling our investments for the future or asking working families and the middle class to shoulder the whole burden.

My first job was teaching kindergarten, right here in Ithaca. Over the years, I've watched many of my students grow up and become productive members of our community. Many of these young people would like to stay in upstate New York, or come back if they'd left. But unfortunately too many of them just couldn't find work here. The economic challenges facing our region—years of job losses and outsourcing, and the pressures on family farms—have forced our kids to move away from the place we call home. We need to change that.

The election is in 2014, so Robertson has a busy year of campaigning ahead of her. Last week she hit the ground running, visiting cities including Owego, Jamestown, Hornell and Corning, among others. For more information go to marthaforney.com.

Tough Turtle

Continued from page 3

together for the first time. "We are working hard to make things run smoothly, yet understanding and flexibility on the part of the racers will go a long way towards making this event a success for everyone," she says.

So far, the Tough Turtle seems to

be right on target. "Due to the generosity of our sponsors and the community, it appears we are well on track to meet our goal of raising \$40,000 [for ICG]," says Marteau.

While she is proud of the work ICG's staff, volunteers and participants have so far accomplished on an "extremely conservative" budget, she says, "We have lofty goals of completing development of our physical garden site [in Cass Park], including this year's plans of adding an outdoor kitchen, bees and chickens in the edible garden, an edible forest garden, dwarf fruit orchard, and in the next couple of years, an education building on site."

To support ICG's work, people are encouraged to sponsor Tough Turtle competitors at www.tough-turtleithaca.com or to start training for next year's race.

Conference

Continued from page 4

say no, and we need something hopeful," she says. "We've got to come together as a community and see what we can do. I'm not suggesting that we as a region can solve this problem, but we can be a part of the solution."

For more information visit: <http://climatesmartclimateready.org>.

For the Record

In the story about the one-room schoolhouse (Tompkins Weekly, April 8) the email address listed was incorrect. The correct address is tburgmontessori@gmail.com.



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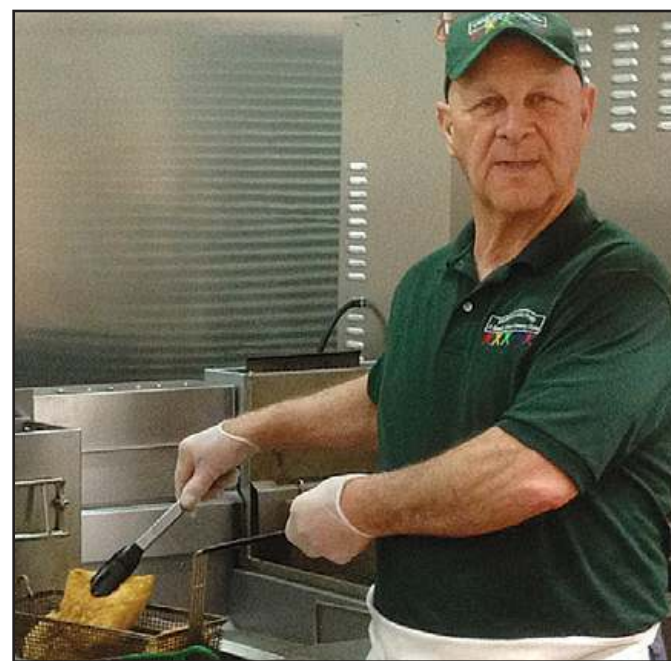
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