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VIEWPOINT PHOTOGRAPHY

meet

**DEBI
WHELAN**

FOLLOWING
HER NORTHSTAR



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FOLLOWING HER NORTHSTAR

BY JEAN DANIELS, CREATIVE WRITER

To solve a problem, experts say we should “focus inventively, intentionally on what solutions might look or feel like and generate ideas that help us escape circumstantial traps.” That is just what resident Debi Whelan and her late husband, Larry, set out to do in 2008 when they sold their business and pursued philanthropy with a focus on the developmentally disabled community, identifying and empowering people and programs that elevate Special Education.

Nationwide, there is a shortage of Special Education teachers to support children and adults with specific needs, and Long Island is no exception. Demand is high, and supply is low for qualified teachers, paraprofessionals, and related providers. In 2008, Larry and Debi formed The Whelan Foundation, which, among other good deeds, awards grants to support the higher educational goals of Long Island student recipients entering or actively pursuing a degree in any Special Education-related field. “It was and still is our goal to equalize opportunities normally denied to students because of cost. We create meaningful solutions through scholarships and student loan debt reduction,” says Debi. “We believe that everyone should have the chance to succeed.”

Though Larry did not live to see the Foundation’s expansion and scope of impact, Debi is sure he would be brimming with pride. “I think he would be amazed and elated,” she says. “Since Larry passed, my son Matthew has been by my side the whole time. The Foundation has grown leaps and bounds with his and my daughter Jacqueline’s help, along with our dedicated Board of Directors made up of talented business professionals. The Whelan Foundation was started as a very small family endeavor comprised of our children, their spouses, my husband, and myself,” says Debi. “The kids wanted to take up the mantle and form a board, gathering a good mix of talented folks forged from family, friends, and colleagues. One of our newest members is our first scholarship recipient. He knows how it helped him so he is personally invested and excited to add his perspective to the Foundation’s board. We are beyond thrilled to have him.”

Since its inception, the Whelan Foundation has donated \$2.3 million and has given out 10 full scholarships and 19 “Student Loan Debt Reduction” scholarships. In addition to also helping out like-minded and often underfunded organizations, they donate to schools outfitting quiet rooms and supplying learning aids such as smartboards for the classrooms. Scholarship recipients are required to maintain a minimum 3.5 average to garner awarded funds. They do not



have to attend college on the Island but must be residents. “I would say that 99 percent of graduates come back home to teach here, which is so heartening,” says Debi. “Everyone benefits—from the students themselves, to the specific needs population they eventually serve, to the ultimate socioeconomic return for our communities.”

Before forming the Foundation, Larry and Debi owned Whelan International, a lucrative facilities maintenance company. As the business

grew, it became involved in several charities and foundations, such as the John Theissen Children Foundation, devoted to sick and underprivileged kids, and the Special Olympics. “I was a volunteer coach for a few teams within the Special Olympics, falling in love with the population,” says Debi. She is also on the board for Camp Northstar on Shelter Island, which the Whelan Foundation vigorously supports, catering to people with disabilities. Camp Northstar was founded in

1998 as a nonprofit funded through donations and community outreach. The camp promotes the physical, social, and emotional needs of developmentally disabled children and adults through activities involving sports and creative teamwork to bolster their confidence while on a journey to independence as productive members of society.

Debi has lived in Wincoma for eight years. “I was a South Shore girl my entire life. I never thought I’d move north. I came

here to be closer to my son and loved it.” Between her two children, she has six grandkids: Christopher (20), William (18), Alice (15), Henry (12), George (10), and Greta (8). “This past year, we gathered for a big family ski trip to Deer Valley Resort in Park City, Utah. It’s an alpine ski resort in the Wasatch Range, about 36 miles east of Salt Lake City. The younger grandkids are really into hockey now. They all play for the Junior Islanders. I’ve become a hockey grandma and attend as many games as possible. In the warmer weather, you’ll probably find me on the water paddleboarding or playing a round of golf.”

Special education is most accurately described as a field of study, as it encompasses a broad area of knowledge and practice dedicated to



educating students with disabilities, including specialized teaching methods, assessments, and support strategies. Serving the Special Education community seems to run in the Whelan family. “My daughter-in-law was a Special Education teacher. My daughter is a Special Education teacher. My niece works with the developmentally disabled population as well. So, it seems to be something our family has gravitated to by coincidence or design.”

Debi’s older grandchildren make time to volunteer at Camp Northstar. “When you think

of something in the abstract, it’s different than when interacting with people one-on-one. I plan to get the younger grandkids to volunteer, too.”

The Whelan Foundation is completely funded through donations and community support. It offers programs for students and educators, camps, and enrichment opportunities. “Our goal is to empower the Special Education community and the children and adults with developmental disabilities,” says Debi. “We’re here to make a lasting, generational influence that continues to grow.”

The Whelan Foundation is 100% volunteer-driven and focused on fundraising and program support impacting Special Education for the future. To learn more about scholarship opportunities, make a personal or corporate donation, or consider volunteering, go to www.whelanfoundation.org



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