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Volunteers use IMG Miami Marathon to help special needs kids - A rabbi and a group of teens from the Pinecrest/Kendall area are running in the ING Miami Marathon on Sunday to raise awareness for special needs children.

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When Zach Levy started volunteering at The Friendship Circle Miami more than a year ago, he never thought running a half marathon would be one of his duties.

But Zach, 14, decided to go the distance to help raise funds for the Circle, which works with special needs children. He and a team of about 15 from the Chabad Center of Kendall/Pinecrest will be running in the ING Miami Marathon on Sunday for the first time. Rabbi Yossi Harlig of the Chabad, also running the half marathon, orchestrated the group.

"I had to come out of my comfort zone and wake up at 5 a.m. every day to train," Harlig said. "The idea came about because we wanted to do something to inspire people."

The Friendship Circle is an international organization that pairs volunteers with special needs children. Volunteers form friendships with the children through weekly social gatherings.

Zach has been paired with Jonah, a 6-year-old with high-functioning autism.

"I knew I wanted to volunteer for something that would count," said Zach, an eighth-grader at Southwood Middle School. "Let's say you paint a house, it's a good deed but it won't last forever. If you become someone's friend it's way more powerful."

Zach has been running 5 kilometers, or about 3 miles, a day to train for the race.

"Before I was only used to running two to three miles, so I knew this would be a challenge," said Zach "I know I can probably do it and I really think it helps the friendship circle. For me, it's a win-win situation."

Each year the Friendship Circle hosts a walk-a-thon called Walking 4 Friendship, but this year the group wanted to do something different.

"We really hope to bring awareness and raise funds," Harlig said.

Participants enlisted sponsors for their run. The proceeds will be used for various gatherings that drive the organization.

Nachema Harlig, director of The Friendship Circle Miami and Harlig's wife, is not sure if she

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will run or not, but she will be on the sidelines cheering on the team.

“For our teen volunteers, the program promotes tolerance and teaches the value of giving to others,” Harlig said. “Parents are thrilled to see their child make a new friend and become part of the community.”

Yossi says running in the marathon is a metaphor for the challenges special needs children face.

“I am inspired by the teens in the program, and the children who rise to the challenges of their everyday life with such enthusiasm,” Harlig said. “For children with special needs and their families, every day is like running a marathon.”

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