

Volleyball tourney draws thousands

By BRIDGET DOWNES

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The beach was packed on Sept. 8 as thousands of people gathered on the sand to play volleyball in the 22nd annual Michelle O'Neill Volleyball Tournament.

The event — one of the largest in Long Beach every year — drew people from as far away as Florida, California and Toronto.

Both competitive and recreational players took part in the tournament, which is organized by Carol O'Neill, mother of Michelle O'Neill and president of the Michelle O'Neill Foundation. The event honors Michelle, who died of cancer in 1996 at age 24.

"It was an absolutely terrific day," O'Neill said. "We had the biggest turnout, and we've had nothing but positive feedback from everybody we've spoken to."

The proceeds are donated to organizations that benefit children with cancer, such as the Make-A-Wish Foundation, the Ronald McDonald House, St. Jude's Research Hospital, the American Cancer Society and the Frances Pope Foundation, although some of the funds are also given to families with children who are undergoing cancer treatment.

This year's theme was "Be Kind." The slogan was plastered on much of the merchandise that was sold, including hats and shirts, O'Neill said.

"Kindness, by definition, means charitable, and to be nice and kind-hearted, and I felt that the people that come to the tournament are already showing great kindness to help the children," O'Neill said. "They already were kind, and I asked them to continue."

While she doesn't yet know how much money was raised, O'Neill said the event was most likely more successful than last year.

There were 410 teams that played across 65 nets, O'Neill said, which totaled 2,656 players. The winner of the four-man competitive game was "MJ vs. LeBron," while the winner of the six-man competitive game was "Dig These Balls." A team called "Block You Like a Hurricane" won best team name.

DJ E.J. Weston provided music while John Barnes served as the master of ceremonies. All of the nets were donated by Rich Heiles from East End Volleyball, and Father Frank Shannon of St. Gertrude Parish and St. Mary's Star of the Sea in Far Rockaway offered a blessing before the event. Swingbelly's BBQ catered the event, and a hot dog wagon was run by "volly-teers" Gerry Snell and Jane Blackburn.

Before the event began, O'Neill thanked the volunteers involved in the planning and set-up, and introduced some of the children who have benefitted from the donations.

"The best part, for me, is always the opening ceremony," O'Neill said. "There were seven families of the children we've been able to help."

"It is my favorite day of the year," said Danny Marquino. "I love you so much,



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JACKIE O'NEILL-WALSH, LEFT, with Caryl Ann Niven, Carol O'Neill and Rick O'Neill.

DANNY'S CREW PLAYER Larry Marquino bumped the ball up to help his teammates spike the ball over the net. Marquino has been competing in the tournament since it started and changed the team name to Danny's Crew after his son, Danny, was diagnosed with cancer.

JAY HYMAN FROM Danny's Crew swatted the ball back over the net during the tournament.

Mrs. O'Neill, and I want to thank you for all you do to help kids. I am so lucky that you let me be part of this day. I know this year, the theme is to be kind. Everyone should always be kind to each other. Sometimes life can be hard and if we are all kind to each other, it helps everyone be happy."

"I think it's so important for our donors to see exactly what the founda-

tion accomplishes with their donations," she said. "For them to see the children up there with us — they're very grateful, and so are we."

O'Neill also thanked the City of Long Beach, the Department of Parks and Recreation, Beach Maintenance, the Department of Public Works, the lifeguards and the Long Beach Police Department for their support.