

## LONG ISLAND / NASSAU

# Long Beach family's polar plunge party repays Make-A-Wish

Masha Benitez now plunges to pay forward her Disney cruise wish.



Masha Benitez, 14, shown here prior to the Long Beach Polar Bears Super Bowl Splash on Feb. 4, 2018, was a past recipient of the Make-A-Wish Foundation and now works to pay that gift forward. Photo Credit: Marlo Jappen

**By Marlo Jappen**

*Updated February 10, 2018 6:39 AM*

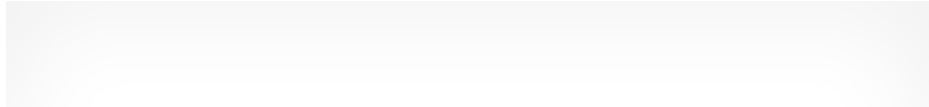
Beginning at 9 a.m. on Super Bowl Sunday, a crowd showed up at a sand-colored home on the corner of Franklin Boulevard in Long Beach to enjoy mimosas, omelettes, live music and auctions.

Although the party was held on the morning of America's biggest game, these festivities were in anticipation of another special event: the annual Long Beach Polar Bears Super Bowl Splash. Funds from the party, as well as the subsequent splash, benefited Make-A-Wish Metro New York and Western New York.

Michele Quigley and husband Luis "Tony" Benitez have been hosting this party for the past eight years because their daughter, Masha Benitez, was a Make-A-Wish recipient when she was 6.

— "After I got my wish I wasn't afraid of anything," says Masha, who underwent six surgeries related to heart complications and ear issues and is now 14. "Not doctors or needles."

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For her wish, she went on a Disney cruise, where she swam in a lagoon, sang with a band and rode a dolphin.

“She realized she was fearless,” Quigley said.

Masha received her wish less than a year after she was adopted by her parents. She had open-heart surgery when she was 3 at Cohen Children’s Medical Center in Queens, which is how her family met her.

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Before her wish was granted, medical appointments were a challenge for Masha. She developed a fear of doctors while living in an orphanage in

Russia until she was 5.

However, after receiving her wish Masha approached procedures with confidence and ease.

“It was a game-changer for us and it changed our family’s life,” Quigley said. “We owe a lot to Make-a-Wish.”

— Masha now participates on her middle school’s softball and wrestling teams, and her mom said she received clearance for varsity sports from her cardiologist this year.

Between the party and Masha’s polar plunge team, the family says they have raised nearly \$15,000 the last two years. She looks forward to the polar bear splash every year and starts passing out flyers to local businesses after Christmas.

“She wants to do a lot of this on her own,” Quigley said.

As for Masha’s next wish? She wants to be a teacher.

— “It’s for the same reason that I do Make-A-Wish,” Masha said. “I want to help people.”

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