**Food Allergy School Awareness Launch, Sept. 15, Merion Cricket Club.**

Jamison “JJ" Vulopas refused to get on the bus the first day of Kindergarten. “I have food allergies, and a kid at the bus stop was eating a doughnut and touched the bus handrail in front of me,” he explains. “It's one of my first memories. I remember running to my mom. I remember crying.”

With a little encouragement, Vulopas eventually got on the bus that day, and the little boy who was allergic to dairy and tree nuts quickly learned how to navigate bus handrails as well as the many obstacles students with food allergies face at school. “It’s not easy navigating school with a food allergy,” Vulopas says. “But with support of some amazing educators, I found a way to get by.”

Actually, he did more than just get by. He graduated high school as the senior class president.

Now he wants to empower other elementary students who are just like him. Vulopas, a 2019 graduate of the Wharton School at University of Pennsylvania who now works in New York City, is on a mission. And with the help of Red Sneakers for Oakley, a national non profit organization that raises awareness about food allergies, Vulopas is one step closer to reaching a lofty goal: His children’s books, food allergy resources, and empowerment activities in every elementary school in the nation. First stop is PA Can! — an initiative that will supply school nurses and school counselors with authentic resources in each of the 1,600-plus public elementary schools in Pennsylvania.

**Red Sneakers for Oakley is hosting a PA Can launch event at the Merion Cricket Club 2 p.m. on September 15.** The event also will celebrate Pennsylvania school nurses, Pennsylvania school counselors and advocates like JJ.

Dr. Jonathan Spergel, Chief of the Allergy Section at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, will speak at the event, as will Vulopas and Red Sneakers for Oakley’s co- founders, Merrill and Bobby Debbs.

Red Sneakers for Oakley is raising funds to support the program, with a portion also benefitting the allergy section of Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia.

“Pa Can will transform food allergy awareness in this state, and I’m confident we can find the supporters in Pennsylvania and throughout the nation to make this initiative a reality,” says Bobby Debbs. “Pa CAN will save lives and, even more, empower all kids throughout Pennsylvania to be all they can be.”

Raising food allergy awareness is important to Bobby and his wife, Merrill, who established their organization after the death of their 11-year-old son Oakley due to a fatal allergic reaction to nuts.

“We are committed to educating and advocating for food allergy awareness and its dangers around the world,” explains Merrill. “JJ is a role model to many in the food allergy community. What he is doing fits into our mission perfectly. Pa Can will educate and inspire elementary children throughout Pennsylvania and someday the nation.”

Under the plan, starting in October, each public elementary school in Pennsylvania will receive hard copies of Vulopas’s two children’s books, *Land of Not*, which encourages kids to develop an asset-based mindset, and *The Class That Can: Food*

*Allergies,* which teaches students about food allergies. Vulopas co-wrote the second book with another youth advocate, Riya Jain, under the guidance of Northwestern’s Dr. Ruchi Gupta, a prominent food allergy researcher. *The Class That Can: Food Allergies* will be unveiled at a conference in Chicago at the end of the month, just in time to be included in the PA Can package.

In addition to receiving the books, all PA Can schools will receive free password- access to two websites, both which will go live in October: www.thelandofcan.com, Vulopas’s blog site that features a host of food allergy resources for teachers, parents and students, and www.citizensofcan.com, which contains lesson plans and fun activities for the 13 Words of Can. The latter site also will feature short podcast interviews with professionals from across the nation, including the University of Pennsylvania’s Dr. Adam Grant, who talked with JJ about Empathy, and Dr. Angela Duckworth, who talked with JJ about Grit.

“The support I received from Penn has been extraordinary,” JJ says. In fact, if it wasn’t for a freshman convocation speech delivered by University of Pennsylvania president Dr. Amy Gutmann, Vulopas’ book would not even exist.

“I heard Dr. Gutmann’s speech and was immediately compelled to do something to help others,” Vulopas explains. “I later emailed Dr. Gutmann my ideas, and she immediately put me in touch with resources and people at the university who could help me substantiate my arguments with evidence, who could help me formulate my idea of a Land of Can.”

More than 30 million Americans, including 1 in 13 children, have a food allergy, and nearly 40 percent of these have already experienced a severe or life-threatening reaction.

“One in 13 children is a lot of kids,” Vulopas says. “We have to deal with their immediate safety, of course. But we also can’t overlook the psycho-social impact, which, left unchecked, can have devastating effects on the success of a child.”

“A child can not learn if a child does not feel safe,” Bobby Debbs adds. “Far too many kids with food allergies are fearful in their classrooms and schools. We have to raise awareness while empowering these kids. We can. And we will. Advocates like JJ are transforming how we raise food allergy awareness in this nation.”

For more information about the Food Allergy Awareness Reception, visit www.thelandofcan.com/pacan.

For more information about Red Sneakers for Oakley, visit www.redsneakers.org. For more information about JJ Vulopas and the Land of Can Initiative, visit www.thelandofcan.com.

ABOUT RED SNEAKERS FOR OAKLEY Red Sneakers for Oakley (RSFO) is a nonprofit organization committed to educating and advocating for food allergy awareness nationwide. Oakley was the 11-year-old son of Robert and Merrill Debbs. After the tragic death of Oakley due to a fatal allergic reaction in 2016, the Debbs family founded Red Sneakers for Oakley. Oakley loved his red sneakers and the family realized they could use these sneakers as a powerful symbol for increased education and awareness for allergies. Red Sneakers for Oakley immediately gained national exposure through supporters wearing red sneakers and posting their photos on social media. They have since launched a multi-pronged approach to mobilize people to take action through grassroots organizing, digital media campaigns, school-based educational programming, and community events.