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Autistic Aspirations: Five-mile walk launches new non-profit



Walkers pose for a photo during Autistic Aspirations walk on Saturday, June 16.

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By Olivia Hall

A small but highly dedicated group made its way around the outside of the Shops at Ithaca Mall on Saturday, June 16, to raise awareness about autism and funds for a new non-profit organization in Ithaca — Autistic Aspirations.

About 40 walkers completed five rounds for a total of five miles walking each.

Autism spectrum disorders (ASD), including “classic” autism and Asperger Syndrome, describes a range of developmental disabilities that are expressed in language delays, social and

communication challenges, and unusual behaviors and interests, according to the Centers for Disease Control. ASD occurs in 1 of 88 children and is about five times more common among boys than girls.

In its fifth year, the annual Autism Walk is the brainchild of Alexander Stewart, boxing coach at Ultimate Athletics and a former protégé of professional boxer Floyd Patterson. His adventure as the self-named “Autism Fighter” began in 1999 when one of his three sons, Jacob, was diagnosed with autism.

“I kind of felt that he was lost,” said Stewart. “So that’s when I became a kid again for a little while. I started getting on my hands and knees. I was watching what he did.” Seeing the world through his son’s eyes allowed Stewart to develop a number of board games and toys such as “Marble Mania” that helped Jacob to lengthen his attention span from just seconds to over three minutes at a time.

“Jacob has accomplished so many things the doctors said he would never do,” said Stewart with pride. Now, at age 17, “he has one of the highest scores in the state on the Regents exams in math.”

Thus the idea for Autistic Aspirations was born.

“I realized that if I can help Jacob, I can help someone else,” Stewart explained.

After investing significant amounts of his own time and money into building the toys, writing a children’s book about autism (“The Smunkarellies”), and raising funds for autism-related organizations, Stewart decided to streamline his efforts by turning Autistic Aspirations into an officially registered nonprofit. “I hope I can do more things and get help doing them,” he said.

If the Autism Walk is any indication, Stewart will have many helping hands at his disposal. Among the walkers were families affected by autism, fighters from Ultimate Athletics, and many friends whom he has infected with his enthusiasm for the cause. Local businesses provided refreshments.

Terry Tefft, walking with several family members, has a son and a grandson with autism and was one of the original participants in the Autism Walks.

“The first one was 20 miles,” he remembered, having finished it despite previously having lost half of his lung. “I would do anything for my kids.”

Coming together from as far away as Elmira and Rochester, this year’s participants raised more than \$2,300, more than doubling the event’s target of \$1,000.

A significant sum came from a family who chose to remain anonymous. A spokesperson for the family explained that Stewart has spent a lot of time helping them with their autistic child, “with the routines, and not just with the physical aspect but also spiritually. They just feel very grateful, and they’re very grateful that they can help out.”

About half of the funds raised will go to local and state organizations such as Franziska Racker Centers in Ithaca, which provides a variety of educational, clinical, and support services for people with special needs and their families, according to its website. The rest will cover the non-profit registration costs for Autistic Aspirations.

Stewart has big plans for the organization. With greater financial resources, he hopes to be able to bring his toys to more children across the country, and the next installments of “The Smunkarellies” are already in the works.

But first and foremost, “we want to do more for families in this area, because autism always affects the whole family, financially and emotionally.” Through support groups, financial assistance, and special events such as Thanksgiving dinners, “we want to make sure that the families know that they’re not alone.”

Autistic Aspirations — which can be found online at www.autisticaspirations.com — will continue its fund-raising efforts with a boxing smoker (amateur exhibition fights) on at 3 p.m. Saturday, June 23 at Ultimate Athletics and a charity auction planned for Nov. 15.

http://www.ithaca.com/news/article_26e87d76-bbe0-11e1-a658-0019bb2963f4.html