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More than 1,000 people show up to walk for autism research : Walk Now for Autism Speaks event raises more than \$164,000

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The Santa Barbara community can always be counted on to rally for a good cause. Still, it had to be a little surprising for many involved to witness Saturday's turnout for the first annual Walk Now for Autism Speaks. It certainly didn't hurt that it was held on a pristine autumn morning at East Beach. Over a thousand people gathered to walk a 2.5-mile loop to the wharf and back. Their fundraising efforts contributed over \$164,000 to the cause.

Since being founded in 2005, Autism Speaks has grown into the nation's largest autism science and advocacy organization. It is dedicated to funding research into the causes, prevention, treatments and a cure for autism. This event was created out of a partnership with Walk Now for Autism 0xd0 a grassroots organization which leads walks and fundraising efforts both in the U.S. and abroad.

Considering it was an inaugural event, participants seemed very organized with many of them grouped into teams. Darlene Pisacane is a mother of an autistic son and a sixth grade teacher at Foothill Elementary School in Goleta. She helped rallied a team of 30 people; many of whom were students. "We want to raise awareness," she said. "It's good to start at schools to get early intervention." She attributed that as a key factor enabling her son, who is 8, to be in a normal classroom.

Most of the teams wore customized shirts bearing the name of an autistic inspiration. Team L.J. wore blue shirts with a quote on the back from Hans Asperger -- an Austrian pediatrician who pioneered autism research: "For success and art, a dash of autism is essential." L.J. is the eight-year-old son of Ventura resident Melissa Lewis. The team was about 75 strong with one man carrying a poster board with L.J.'s photo. According to his mother, the boy is a model for well-adjusted autistic children as he attends regular school and is the starting quarterback for his flag football team. "It's amazing all these people are coming out to raise awareness," she said.

Another group wore baby blue shirts with the words, "Ben's Beach Party," on the front. Loren Shepard rallied 28 people who raised over \$1,300. About half of them were walking on Saturday. Her stepson, Ben, is 24 years and is able to live independently despite his autism. Holding a yellow balloon and wearing a satisfied smile, he told the News Press, "I'm feeling good." "Ben has always wanted to be active in the community," Mrs. Shepard explained. "We wanted to pull this together for him."

She expressed hope that events such as this would do more than just raise awareness. "It needs to be more directed," she said of autism research. "We need to make sure all avenues will be explored." Walking nearby, Jeanne Mohle wore a hat adorned with antlers. She's the director of a local non-profit called New Directions Travel -- an organization which takes adults with disabilities on vacations. Those with autism often participate on these trips. "We get reports that their self-esteem shot up," she said. "Our mission is to show the public what wonderful individuals these people are."

Before and after the walk, a band entertained the crowd with some rock 'n roll. When they played a song by Journey, it hit a special chord with one of the groups. "Jack's Journey" was led by Mary Lou Schmidt from Carpinteria. Jack is her grandson who lives in Chesterfield, Missouri. His family usually participates in the St. Louis autism walk but couldn't do it this year, so Mrs. Schmidt and her team were carrying the torch. Reflecting Jack's love of the beach, their shirts were decorated with a Hawaiian lei and a "J" modeled



ROBBY BARTHELMESS/NEWS-PRESS



Participants in the first annual Walk Now for Autism Speaks fundraising even cross a footbridge alongside Cabrillo Boulevard. Above, Julian Franco runs toward the finish line with his friends.



Above, Walk Now for Autism Speaks participants make their way back toward East Beach while on Cabrillo Blvd. Below, walkers enjoyed live music as they got back to the finish line.



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"This is a lifelong commitment for our family," she asserted. Mrs. Schmidt explained that complications related to the central nervous system such as seizures can be a major problem for those with autism as they get older. "Hopefully, through continued research, Jack can have a normal life," she said.

Along the pathway were signs with facts related to the condition. Statistics reveal that 67 children are diagnosed with autism every day. Volunteers wearing orange shirts cheered on walkers and passed out water. Wearing a shirt which said "Team Marcus," Santa Barbara resident Dan Encell walked alongside a group of small children. Marcus Marquis is an autistic four-year-old who goes to All Saints Preschool with Mr. Encell's son. "Initially, I thought this was just for him," he admitted. "We got here and realized it was this large-scale event. We couldn't have asked for a better day." The team raised \$6500 in just the past few weeks.

When the walkers returned to the starting point, they were able to seek information while browsing a "resource fair." An array of booths were set up by organizations pertaining to autism and other disabilities. Oil paintings done by autistic individuals were on display. Tiny tots flocked to the jumpers while their parents rehydrated. A group called Team George was gathered for a photo. The organizer, Karen Wiksell, explained that they were all in the Special Education Advisory Program at UCSB and named the team after their inspirational adviser, George Singer. The 24 members raised \$2,000 for the cause. "People need to know that this isn't something that is going to ruin your life," Ms. Wiksell said. "It's essential to get the word out that there are services which can give people hope."

In the midst of it all, a beaming Ann Marquis basked in the sun with Marcus in her arms. "I'm totally in awe of the support," she exclaimed. She pointed out the back of her shirt which displayed her three primary goals: Awareness, Knowledge and Understanding. "Santa Barbara has amazing resources to support this cause," she said. "This is an actual showing of what can happen in a small community with a little momentum."

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