

Nebraska City News-Press (NE)

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Winning Float Stems From Passion Of NC Natives

For former Nebraska City residents Cathy (Kempkes) Martinez and Vicki (McCown) Deppenbusch, winning first place in the AppleJack parade float competition was less about accolades and more about spreading the word about a cause that has become both of their passions - autism awareness.

Both have sons on the Autism spectrum. Cathy's son Jake is eight and Vicki's son Jacob is 12. Both women are working to form a support group in Nebraska City for families affected by autism. Cathy is currently the president of the Autism Family Network of Lincoln, which serves 300 families in Lancaster County, and Vicki is the vice-president. Martinez said there are 15-20 autistic children being served by the Nebraska City school district.

Cathy's son Jake was diagnosed at 25 months.

"He's the reason I got involved," she said.

Some of the initial signs of the disorder were a lack of eye contact and lack of language skills.

Some children also demonstrate repetitive behaviors.

Prior to the autism diagnosis, Jake was evaluated for hearing loss and underwent social testing, which revealed that he was moderately to severely autistic. Cathy said she was glad to learn what the family would be dealing with, but that the diagnosis was difficult to take.

"It was like a punch in the stomach," she said.

"All the things you think about when they're born, college or marriage, all that is wiped out from under you."

Jake was enrolled in a behavior therapy program, Applied Behavior Analysis, out of Minneapolis, which costs \$60,000 a year, or \$5,000 per month. Cathy said since insurance doesn't cover treatment for autism, families like hers are forced to cash in their 401K or college funds or forego treatment.

"Either option isn't good," she said.

The family took out a second mortgage on their house, cashed in their retirement, and after accumulating \$250,000 in bills, eventually filed for bankruptcy.

"Would I do it again?"

Yes," Cathy said.

Both Cathy and Vicki are working to introduce legislation that will create insurance coverage for the condition.

In the mean time, she credits Lincoln Public Schools and Jake's speech therapist for helping her son develop.

"LPS has done a phenomenal job. Since age three and a half, he has had round the clock service," she said.

Jake now rides a bike and is toilet trained, which can be a difficult task for autistic children. He can also now write his alphabet and his name, and count objects.

"He has gained a lot of skills thanks to the diligence of staff and our family," Cathy said. Jake uses a computerized communication device. "He's probably not going to be verbal, but if he can communicate, we can know his feelings, wants and needs," she said. While he struggles with stimuli that goes unnoticed by most of us, Cathy said her son having autism has also given him artistic talents that few possess. Thanks to therapy and the help of computers, autistic children are able to develop many important life skills. "Adults and teens are writing novels and typing 120 words per minute," Cathy said. She urges anyone who encounters a family dealing with autism to be "compassionate" and "accepting." "They don't need the dirty looks or the sighing," she said. "Be supportive of these families. They need it."

Vicki's son was diagnosed at 21 months. Through the use of sign language and pictures, he was able to develop some verbal skills and is on the higher functioning end of the spectrum. He uses a computer and an iPad to communicate. Like her friend, Vicki said her family has put a lot of dollars into obtaining the best therapy possible. "Our family has put everything we have into this," she said. While her son has come a long way since his diagnosis thanks to family support and therapy, autism causes associated issues that still affect Jacob and the rest of the family, including sleep and digestive disturbances. "Autism consumes our lives. If he doesn't sleep, we don't sleep," she said. Vicki said autistic children also tend to be very "sensory-oriented." For example, they may be excited by hearing lights buzz or be disturbed by a tag scraping the back of their neck. He enjoys creating cartoon strips, and from the age of two or three, he was drawing eyebrows and sideburns on faces rather than stick figures. Vicki said she hopes more people will recognize the special qualities of the autistic population. "They all have gifts. They all have talents. Give them the patience and the opportunity to be heard," she said. Autistic children deserve to be respected for the amount of effort they give on a daily basis, she said. "These kids work hard. Instead of playing, they're being tutored or getting speech therapy," she said. Vicki said, as an advocate, she hopes to dispel stereotypes. "Some people's idea of an autistic person is Rainman," she said. The goal of the two women is also to make sure that the needs and struggles of the autistic community are relayed to the broader population. "My goal was to make a difference," Vicki said. "When they don't have a voice, someone has to be that voice."

Photo submitted news press

The Autism Speaks float was named best overall AppleJack parade float. "We were so excited to win Best Overall Float. The families from Nebraska City, Lincoln and Omaha were so excited and we're looking forward to next year," said Vicki Depenbusch. "We were so thankful to everyone's support that helped make this happen, Bruce, Jan, Brent and Heidi Madsen, Arbor Bank, Mike Knapp Construction, Ron and Dani McCown." Other Winning Floats: Best Commercial float was Walmart, Best Use of Theme (We Have an App(le) for That), went to Arbor Bank and Most Original went to Lourdes Central Catholic School.

Autism walk

The 2011 Nebraska Walk Now for Autism Speaks will begin at 1 p.m. Sunday, Oct. 9 at Haymarket Park (Saltdogs Stadium). To register, visit www.walknowforautismspeaks.org or send email to nebraska@autismspeaks.org.

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