

Running for Joshua

Upcoming 5K event to raise funds for spinal muscular atrophy

By Jessica Schrader
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Not many 8-year-olds can say they have more than 400 friends, but Troy resident Joshua Cueter can.

The third-grader at Martell Elementary School meets up with these friends once a year at an annual event held in his name. It's the Joshua's Buddies 5K Run/Walk/Roll, which raises funds and awareness for spinal muscular atrophy, a genetic disease that Joshua was diagnosed with when he was 2.

His parents, Kris and Joe Cueter, have hosted the event for the past seven years.

"When our son was diagnosed, we realized we could either sit and feel sorry for ourselves that we have a child who is going to be in a wheelchair or we can become active in it and show him as he grows up that we're not giving up on this," Kris Cueter said. "It's great to see how the community can come together and come out for a good cause."

This year's event will begin at 9 a.m. on June 24. It will start at St. Elizabeth Church, go through streets in the Sylvan Glen Subdivision and end back at the church.

The "roll" part of the event's title is to accommodate the many children who have spinal muscular atrophy who will be rolling in their wheelchairs through the course. Joshua, who has a more mild form of the disease, is mobile but uses a wheelchair for longer distances.

Spinal muscular atrophy is a motor neuron disease affecting the voluntary muscles that are used for activities such as crawling, walking, head and neck control, and swallowing. About 1 in 6,000 babies are born with it, and about 1 in 40 people are genetic carriers. SMA in its most severe form is the number one killer of children younger than 2.

"We like to tell people we're not out here just for Josh, we're out here for the many, many children who have to fight this disease every day," Cueter said.

Though Joshua isn't crazy about getting so much attention, he always enjoys the event, his mom said.

"I think he's excited to see how his school has gotten involved," she said.

Family friend and neighbor Wendy Dingwall said funds raised at the event help bring researchers closer to the cure.

"It really is a race," she said, noting that the National Institutes of Health has a goal to find a treatment or cure within two years. "We also hope no parent has to lose a child to this disease. If the NIH thinks this can be done in the next two years, our family wants to be part of it."

Robin Gillis, Joshua's teacher, said she and the other teachers at Martell took up a collection to make a donation for the event.

"We feel it's really important to support one of our students who has an issue like the SMA. He's part of our community," she said. "As he goes through the grades, he touches many of the staff members. He's a wonderful kid, and it's a wonderful family. We want to show our support for them in any way we can."

The event will feature entertainment from Rosco the Clown and Band in a Box.

Many local groups are supporting the event. Starbucks is serving coffee, and Whole Foods Market and Nabisco sponsor all of the event's food. Martell Elementary School donates, and many sports teams and clubs come out for the walk.

It costs \$17 to enter, \$20 the day of the event. Each participant will receive an event T-shirt. Last year the walk drew more than 400 participants and raised about \$20,000. About 50 percent of the support comes from the Troy area, Cueter said.

"It's tremendous to see that there's other people that want it just besides us. A lot of people out there that want to see this (disease) gone," she said.

For more information on the event, call the Cueters at (248) 828-2870 or visit www.fightsma.com/buddy_joshua.html.

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