

UNIVERSITY CITY OCTOBER 18, 2014

1st Buddy Walk for Down syndrome awareness at UNCC

HIGHLIGHTS

Julia Cirone smiled and welcomed participants to the Down Syndrome Association of Greater Charlotte's Buddy Walk at UNC Charlotte's Jerry Richardson Stadium on Oct.11.

BY CRYSTAL O'GORMAN - CORRESPONENT

Julia Cirone smiled and welcomed participants to the Down Syndrome Association of Greater Charlotte's Buddy Walk at UNC Charlotte's Jerry Richardson Stadium on Oct. 11.

This was Cirone's second year volunteering at the registration tents for the annual event, the first held at UNCC's new stadium. She remained upbeat, regardless of the stopping and starting caused by scattered thunderstorms. Her hair was damp and curly, her smile wide.

"I like meeting everyone," she said while passing out yellow event wristbands.

Cirone is a 17-year-old Providence High School student who loves to dance ballet at Jami Masters School of Dance and perform in drama class at school. She attends summer camp every year and volunteers in her church's toddler child care.

When she's not performing or volunteering to help others, she likes to curl up with a Nancy Drew book. She has a bubbly personality, a kind heart and an infectious smile.

Cirone also has Down syndrome. That's why she was at the Buddy Walk: to raise financial support for the Down Syndrome Association of Greater Charlotte and community awareness for people like her, who live with Down syndrome.

Her father, Tony Cirone, said, "We've been involved with the Buddy Walk since Julia was born. ... This organization has done a lot for my family, so we want to give back."

He said the association helped the family acquire a support system to get through educational challenges, created a circle of friends for Julia Cirone and provided her with exciting opportunities like the sweetheart dance and full- and half-day camps.

Most importantly, he said, the walk raises awareness that people with Down syndrome deserve to lead full, happy lives integrated with the larger community.

“Julia has Down syndrome. It’s a part of her, but just a part of her,” Tony Cirone said. “It’s not the whole. She needs to be seen as a whole.”

The Buddy Walk is a nationwide event held on dates in October, which is National Down Syndrome Awareness month.

The walk was created by the National Down Syndrome Society in 1995 to promote inclusion and acceptance of people with Down syndrome, as well as provide a fundraising opportunity for local nonprofits.



square-foot hospitality deck.

About 3,000 people turned out for the event.

Chart-topping pop songs rang out over the sound system and pictures of local children with Down syndrome scrolled across the 70-by-300-foot electronic scoreboard, as walkers made their way off the deck and around the outside of the stadium.

Teams promenaded proudly together in colorful matching T-shirts: Super Cooper’s Side Kicks, Coggins Crew and Branson’s Buddies.

Mothers pushed babies in strollers and pulled toddlers in red wagons. Preschoolers rode on their father’s shoulders, and school-age children walked hand-in-hand with grandparents and friends. The crowd snaked along the sidewalk and looped back around, entering the stadium and walking through a balloon arch on the 49ers’ football field.

Participants and onlookers cheered while walkers passed through the arch and were congratulated by 49ers student-athletes.

The stadium filled with laughter and excitement as participants mingled and enjoyed the festivities.

Organizer Mike Corrigan said he’s been coordinating the event for 12 years, since his daughter Emma – who has Down syndrome – was 16 months old. “It is an experience. ... It grows every year, and the family teams really get into it,” he said.

The student-athletes hosted sports activities on the field, Elevation Church had a fall-themed arts-and-crafts booth and the Down Syndrome Association sponsored activities including caricature drawings, face-painting, carnival games, raffle prizes and bounce houses.

Unfortunately, the storms only held off until 4:30 p.m., and the event was forced to shut down more than an hour earlier than expected. Despite delays and bad weather, Down Syndrome Association of Greater Charlotte Director Kathryn Lariviere said she believed the event was a success.

Lariviere said the event wouldn't have been possible without association volunteers, Elevation Church and Charlotte 49ers Athletics.

The 49ers Athletics sponsored the event, waived the stadium event fees and provided volunteer student-athletes and the use of field entertainment equipment like tackling dummies.

UNCC Associate Athletic Director for Media Relations Tom Whitestone said the 49ers student-athletes enjoyed sponsoring this event. "It's important for us to give back to the community that supports us and to be a vital piece of that community," he said.

"Community service projects such as this (are) one way we can do that, and the events are a win-win – benefiting the organizations and helping to instill certain values in our student-athletes."



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