

Local group raises autism awareness

By Jennifer Vazquez
 REPORTER

RUTHERFORD — To many, April is a month when beautiful, colorful blossoms fall from the trees after a long winter hiatus. To others, April is a month that brings with it opening day and the re-found joy of watching your favorite team on the baseball diamond. And, yet, to a growing number, April is a month set aside to truly have one's voice heard when it comes to informing and bringing awareness to, what many consider, an epidemic.

Autism Awareness Month spans the entire month of April. During this time, those who have autism, as well as their parents, siblings and friends, come together to raise awareness for the cause.

Many local residents were recently front and center in lending a hand to make sure their voices did not go unheard.

According to Terri Spettell, member of the Rutherford Special Parents Network, a support group for parents and family members with an autistic child, a growing number of children are being diagnosed in New Jersey.

"New Jersey is an especially complex puzzle," said Spettell, a mother of a young child with autism. "No one knows why, and no one sees the numbers slowing down."

Recently, the Rutherford Special Parents Network hosted a series of events to bring the community

together in response to the growing cases of autism among children.

On Saturday, April 17, the network hosted a welcoming breakfast in the Glass Room of the Rutherford Public Library. Over homemade pastries and coffee, many parents shared their personal stories and challenges of raising a child with autism.

One such story centered around a mother whose young boy was diagnosed with autism. After going from doctor to doctor at a time when autism was fairly unheard of, doctors gave her the grim diagnosis that he would never speak and that his IQ was lower than most of his peers.

That was then.

Today, the boy is a freshman in high school and even though he will have to live with autism for the rest of his life, he is performing extremely well in all of his subjects and is on his way to enrolling in honor classes.

According to the Autism Society of America, even though children do not "outgrow" autism, it is treatable. Studies show "that early diagnosis and intervention lead to significantly improved outcomes."

Other conversations at the parents meeting centered around how autism is a mystery in the sense that no one can clearly identify its root cause.

"The most popular theory is that (autism) is somehow connected to the MMR vaccine," explained Spettell. "The environment, genes, pollution, allergies, but no

one really knows. The great thing is that there are a lot of studies these days."

The day after the breakfast get-together, the community was invited to attend an entire day filled with fitness activities.

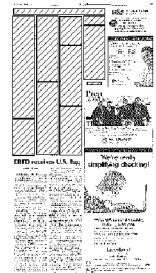
There was a yoga class at the Kip Center. After that, those interested took part in a Zumba class, hosted in Female Fitness on Rutherford's Park Avenue. Those who joined in the day's events were asked for an at-will donation. All of the proceeds were donated evenly to two organizations — the Smile Forever Foundation, which provides financial resources for families of those inflicted with cancer, autism and other disabling diseases, and the Autism Family Services of New Jersey, which provides support services for families with members with autism.

The Zumba class was a huge success with almost double the people anticipated signing up.

Liz Forte, member of the group and mother of a child with autism, and Jeannine Severino, one of the Zumba instructors and mother of a young child with a learning disability, said the event was such a success that the class ran 30 minutes longer at the request of attendees.

"It went great," said Severino. "I'm happy I could be a part of all this. The cause is close to my heart."

Even though Severino's young kindergarten-aged child does not have autism, he attends class with many autistic children since he



does have a learning disability, which has not been diagnosed yet.

Forte explained her personal crusade after having her young child diagnosed at the age of 2 1/2 with autism. He is now 12.

"At the beginning, I didn't know what it meant," she said. "I took him from doctor to doctor, from one specialist to another, to a geneticist, then to a speech therapist. He also went to a nutritionist."

Forte said that a change in diet helped.

One of the most challenging things to many about this developmental disorder is that it spans a huge spectrum, making each case different from the next.

According to Autism New Jersey, "children and adults with autism exhibit atypical, repetitive behaviors and deficits in social and communication skills. Autism is usually diagnosed during

the first three years of life and is four to five times more prevalent in boys than in girls. It knows no racial, ethnic or social boundaries."

The prevalence of autism is considerably high.

"Autism, Asperger's Disorder and PDDNOS are commonly referred to as Autism Spectrum Disorders or ASDs. This label conveys the continuum of ability levels, but is not itself an official diagnosis. Autism Spectrum Disorders affect approximately 1 in 150 individuals," according to Autism New Jersey.

Spettell said that there are resources out there for parents with an autistic child.

Child study teams, which are found in each school district, work with parents in order to help them determine which services their child may need. Such services may include speech

therapy, occupational therapy and behavioral therapy, according to Spettell.

The Rutherford Special Parents Network started off as a couple of mothers with autistic children having frequent breakfast and forming a support group where they could seek to talk to people who knew what they were going through.

They now have approximately 40 parents as part of their network, including some from Carlstadt and Jersey City. They still hold frequent breakfast gatherings and events for their members.

If you or someone you know would like to receive more information or be a part of the Rutherford Special Parents Network, contact Spettell at 917-734-2364 or via e-mail at spettells@yahoo.com.

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