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Family Fun Event Brings Kids with Special Needs, Parents Together

Submitted by Melissa Petrini



From left: The Friend Tree's program director Denise Christiansen, founder Melissa Petrini, and assistant director Deborah McGrath. Photo John Chu

Many wonderful volunteers including the Lamorinda Rugby Club and the Saint Mary's College women's volleyball team came out to help at the recent East Bay Special Needs Family Fun Night and Resource Fair at Heather Farm Park in Walnut Creek - an evening for children with special needs, such as Down syndrome or autism, and their families.

"Often times, parents of a special needs child, tend to stay home because it can be very difficult to go places," said Melissa Petrini, Moraga resident and founder of The Friend Tree Autism Play Center, a newer non-profit organization that hosted the event in collaboration with The Taylor Family Foundation. "There are all kinds of negative situations that can arise from unfamiliar surroundings or strangers who do not understand how to react to a child's behavior or disability, which often times leaves parents feeling alone and isolated."

The event included rock-climbing walls, slides, bungee-jump trampolines, a tunnel to explore and large bubble/foam machines to experience among the many activities that were all catered and attended by these amazing families. The evening was capped with the showing of "Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs."

"Giving these children a place of their own ... to explore and seek out interactions on their own pace and level, [while] catering to their sensory needs ... [helps] these children not feel different, but feel like a kid," said Petrini.

Over 30 special needs exhibitors shared information and offered their help and services at the event.

With many families already grappling with financial stresses, the extra emotional or physical struggles that come with having a child with a disability can be devastating to a marriage, often bringing parents to a breaking point, noted Petrini. "I can't tell you how many parents I have seen and talked to that express deep emotional stress and yearning to just be understood by another parent who knows," she said.

For information about The Friend Tree, visit www.TheFriendTree.org.

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