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FEATURED

Schlitterbahn extends program for special needs families during Waterpark Wednesdays

By Sara Samora | The Herald-Zeitung Jul 12, 2019

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When Sally Waldner and her family moved from Houston to New Braunfels 10 years ago, Sally said her daughter, Joanie, changed.

Joanie is diagnosed with autism and she has seizures. Her doctors told Sally and her husband that they expected the move would send her back into a corner, sucking her thumb and crying.

Instead, Joanie began to improve and gain more abilities.

Sally knew she had to be her daughter's advocate and speak for her. When Joanie's condition improved, however, Sally decided to advocate for others.

Furthermore, Joanie has joined her in speaking up for others, including her best friend, Kevin O'Neill.

One of the things Sally did was start and run a nonprofit called Endless Possibilities for Special Stars.

Another thing she did, along with other mothers of special needs children, was approach Winter Prosapio, corporate director of communications and government relations for Schlitterbahn.

“They said, ‘We have this challenge, you know, our kids really can’t tolerate being in the park all day, they can’t tolerate being in with a bunch of crowds,’” Prosapio said. “And Schlitterbahn is an all-day experience and so we do charge for that because you can spend all day here and really get your money’s worth.”

But for these families, she knew that was not an option. Thus, the Schlitterbahn team began exchanging ideas.

What they came up with was a set day and time at a low price: 5 at 5. Starting at 5 p.m. on Wednesdays, each person with special needs and their family members pay \$5 to enter the park and enjoy the water activities until it closes at 8 p.m.

“I was worried the number of hours wasn’t going to be worth it,” Prosapio said. “But for these families it’s perfect, and they have so many other expenses, like medical expenses, and there’s so many doctors appointments, so many other things going on.”

For the first time in the program’s three years, the program has expanded into July. After the month’s end, Prosapio said they’ll get feedback from the families and see if it was worth it for them. If so, then it will be something to continue.

“We usually do it at the end of the season, when school starts in middle of August,” Prosapio said. “But we’ve talked about doing it for the whole season. So we just want to see how July goes down, and then we’re going to see if we can just keep it going for the whole summer.”

Three organizations, Waldner's EPFSS, along with the Arc of the Hill Country and Oakwood Church Special Needs Ministry, work together to bring special needs families to the park every Wednesday.

However, Prosapio said Schlitterbahn are the not ones who create the criteria for the program. That decision is for the organizations to decide.

New Braunfels resident and Kevin's mom, Kristie O'Neill, said as a single mom she wouldn't have been able to afford the regular price ticket.

"I don't think Kevin could last a whole day anyway, but all that money for just a few hours is great," she said.

Kevin has cerebral palsy. He cannot walk or use his voice, but he does have fun.

"He communicates in other ways," Kristie said. "So I know what he wants and he loves to come here and get in the water."

She said at one area of the park, there's a pirate ship, the water sprays in different directions and there are different toys, so she can keep him still in his wheelchair.

"So it's easier for me to get around with him and he can still participate in the water fight," she said.

Sally said the park has been very accommodating.

“I mean the staff is unbelievable — I don’t know where they get their training to deal with children of all abilities. There are so many different things that they have to know,” Sally said. “They just have the compassion and it’s just in their heart and they just do it.”

For more information, contact Schlitterbahn at (830) 625-2531. For more information on the organizations that help bring special needs families to the park, visit:

- Arc of the Hill Country: www.arcofthehillcountry.org
- Oakwood Special Needs Ministry:
www.oakwoodnb.com/ministries/special-needs-mark-9/
- Endless Possibilities for Special Stars: epforss.org