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South Florida Sun-Sentinel.com

Program for families of special-needs kids grows in popularity

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Forum Publishing Group

January 8, 2009

When Florida Friendship Circle was formed four years ago, it helped two families with special needs children. The program now serves 80 special-needs families from North Broward and South Palm Beach, with the number climbing practically every week.

Sarah Biston, program director, says the popularity of the program has not taken her by surprise. "When we started out, there were not many programs for special-needs children. I think what we are doing is very important," Biston said. "Apart from 80 special-needs families, the program also has over 100 volunteers who help special needs children take part in activities. All our programs are free.

"Both my husband and I have special needs cousins," she said. "This is something we both wanted to do. He looks after the fundraising part while I am in charge of the programs. We have special needs children and volunteers from cities like Parkland, Coral Springs, Boca Raton and Margate. The volunteers are from public and private schools; we are always looking for more."



The Chabad of Parkland-based Friendship Circle, which is a joint effort involving children with special needs, their parents, staff, volunteers and supporters of the program, offers three main programs — Sunday Circle, Friends at Home and holiday activities. Among the three, Biston picks "Friends at Home" as the most important one. "We send two volunteers to the home of a special-needs child as part of the program," she said. "They spend an hour each week with the child. The child thus gets a buddy. It is important as most children with special needs don't have many friends. The program also gives parents some much-needed time to relax. As part of the Sunday circle, we offer yoga, martial arts and play ball; we also take the children to a bowling league."

One out of 12 children born today has some kind of a special need or a learning disability, Rabbi Shuey Biston said. "The corresponding number for autistic children has gone from one in every 100 to one in 47. Programs like the one we offer are more needed than ever before. It is fulfilling to be able to reach out to members of the community that people sometimes overlook.

"We are growing; we seem to get someone new every other week," Rabbi Biston said. "The budget has been doubling every year. I am now running on a budget that is between \$180,000 and \$220,000. It is difficult to raise funds in today's economic conditions, but I knock on doors every day. We have our supporters."

[Boca Raton](#) resident Marla Goodman's son Joshua, who is autistic, has been a part of the Friendship Circle for two years. "He likes to socialize when he is with his friends. He feels comfortable when he is part of the group.... The group has very special people. They do everything from their heart."

Rashel Maikhor, 14, is a volunteer, has been a part of the program for a year. "I always wanted to work with children with special needs. It has been very rewarding. The program has helped me become more sensitive. It has also made me realize how hard it is to raise a kid with disabilities. My friend and I visit Josh once a week. We love making him happy."

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