

Parkland Profile

Group embraces special needs children

By Elissa Rosen

It's a day that Federico Rabinovich looks forward to each week. In fact, his mother, Fabiana, said she often finds him excitedly jumping up and down when his special friend arrives.

Federico enjoys the visits, because he gets to play ball and listen to stories. Fabiana enjoys them, because it gives her 9-year-old son the chance to communicate and have fun, things often limited by his autism.

The Friendship Circle is a Parkland-based organization that brings special needs children and volunteers together to form friendships. Each volunteer is assigned to a child that lives in either north Broward County or south Palm Beach County.

"In a lot of cases involving special needs children, friendship is missing," said Sarah Biston, director of the Friendship Circle. The organization's goal is to provide warmth and friendship to the children and their families through a variety of programs.

The largest of these programs is Friends at Home, which sends volunteers, ages 13 to 17, into the homes of special needs children for an hour once a week. While there, the volunteers do crafts, play computer games and sports, and listen to music with a special needs child between 5 and 18 years old.

This weekly visit not only provides the children with friendship, but it also gives parents a much-needed break.

Rabinovich said even though she is still home during the volunteer's visits, it's nice to have a break from the constant care that her son requires.

Another program offered by the Friendship Circle that helps parents is called Sunday Circle. The group meets once a month, and allows parents to gather and discuss their situations. While the parents meet in one room, their children are in another, participating in activities ranging from clown visits and face painting to physical fitness therapy, Biston said.

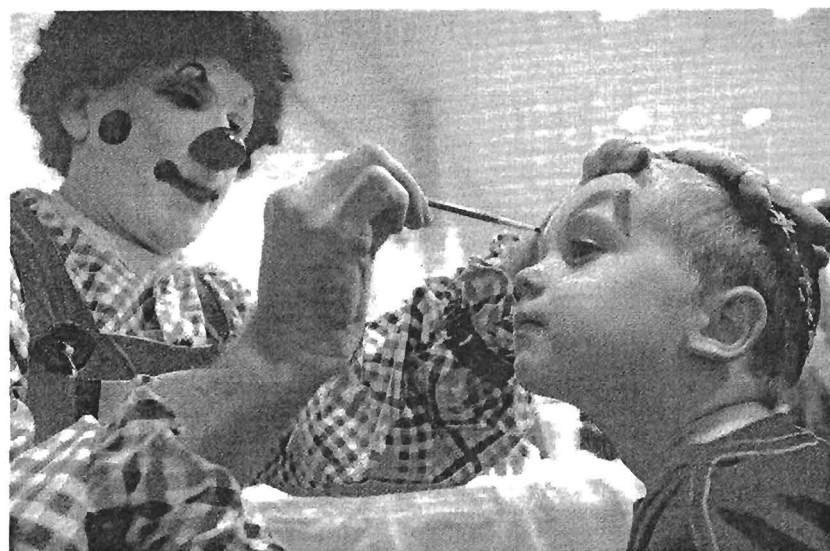
Each year, the Friendship Circle also organizes a Hanukkah Family Festival, at which the special needs children participate in such activities as pony rides, barbecues, latke and doughnut making and face painting, Biston said. Some of the children are even asked to light the menorah.

"Everyone loves that day," Biston said. "The parents get to see their kids involved, and the kid's faces light up when they are called on."

Volunteers are involved in each of the organization's events. Biston said that although students initially come to the organization...



Above, Kaylee Teate, 9, giggles as she hugs her balloon at the Friendship Circle's annual Hanukkah party at the Chabad of Parkland. The party featured face painting, animal balloons, a bounce house and a menorah lighting ceremony. Lindsay Moore is a Gazette staff photographer.



it usually turns into much more.

"Once [volunteers] get involved, they can't wait to see their special friends because they see how much the special friends get out of [the visits] and how much they are getting out of it, too," Biston said.

To keep them encouraged, the Friendship Circle organizes special events for the volunteers, including bowling, ice skating and sushi parties. Each event includes a component that aims to help volunteers build their sensitivity toward people with disabilities.

Rabinovich said the most important thing about the program is that it's completely free.

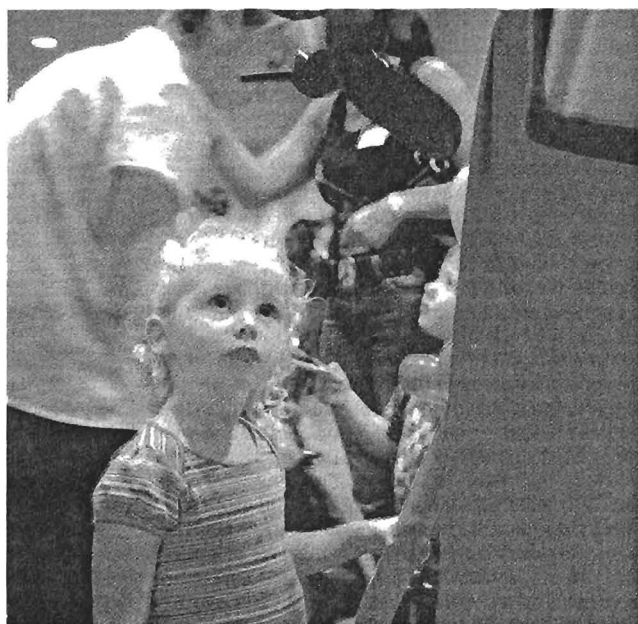
"It isn't something I had to pay for, so it's like a friendship," she said. "It is really hard on us having a kid with special needs, and it is great having a program like this."

Biston said parents usually have a hard time believing that the organization, which is funded through personal donations, is free to the families involved.

"We have to convince them that it's free, because they can't believe we'd do something like that for their family," she said.

Though the program runs through the school year, volunteers and special needs children can become involved at any time. Biston said the organization matches children and volunteers based on where they live, so it could take up to one month to have be paired up.

Visit www.floridafriendshipcircle.com, or call 954-970-9551.



Top left, Slinky the Clown paints a lion on Ari Gutnick, 4. Top right, Rabbi Shue Aaron Cattan lights the menorah. Above, Jenna Emert, 3, watches as Slinky the Clown paints a balloon. Lindsay Moore is a Gazette staff photographer.