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Edge of Autism event draws 1,100 to Buchanan Park for awareness, assistance & fun



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Jun Luu, age 7, of Maytown, is held by her "buddy," Franklin & Marshall College freshman Miranda Stein at the Edge of Autism event at Buchanan Park on Saturday.



As she stood in Buchanan Park on Saturday morning, Susan Luu was grateful for a chance to exhale.

Her three children, all with autism, were happily playing on inflatable sliding boards behind her, under the gaze of family and friends.

And if that were to change, and her 7-year-old daughter Jun had a “meltdown,” Luu knew that the other adults would treat Luu and her non-verbal daughter with compassion, not scorn.

“Here, people get it. They won’t look at me like, ‘What are you doing wrong? Why is your daughter freaking out like this?’ They understand that she gets overwhelmed,” said Luu.

“Here” was the ninth annual Edge of Autism walk, expo and festival, which drew a record 1,100 people to the park, next to Franklin & Marshall College.

The event was sponsored by The Tommy Foundation, a Lancaster-based nonprofit started 11 years ago by Rich Everts and his wife, Sugey Cruz-Everts. Their son Tommy, now 17, has autism.

Autism is a developmental disability that affects some basic brain functions. It’s characterized by difficulties, in varying degrees, with communication, social interaction and repetitive behaviors.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention say one in 68 children in America has autism, a 10-fold increase over the last 40 years.

The Tommy Foundation is active on many fronts. It raises public awareness of autism and provides autism training for parents and college students, who then help children with autism.

Autism-friendly events for families, such as the Edge of Autism day and Sensitive Santa program, which lets children with autism meet Santa by appointment in a quiet setting, are another foundation initiative.

The foundation also holds monthly support group meetings for parents, offers online support around the clock and hosts social groups for teenagers with autism.

More information on the foundation’s events and services is available at www.tommyland.org.

Cruz-Everts said the Edge of Autism is the foundation’s biggest event and its leading fundraiser. Saturday’s event surpassed its \$50,000 goal but a final figure was not immediately available.

The Edge of Autism — described as the largest autism event in southcentral Pennsylvania — addresses awareness, action and acceptance, Cruz-Everts explained.

Participants started the day by going on a 2.5K-walk around the park and surrounding neighborhood to raise awareness of autism.

When they returned, a dozen or so service providers were there to inform parents what actions they can take to get help in the community for their children.

The third part was the festival, where children had fun with crafts, face painting and other activities in an atmosphere of acceptance and safety while their parents renewed old friendships and socialized.

“We call it a family reunion,” said Cruz-Everts.

Luu, who works as a personal care assistant for Lancaster-Lebanon Intermediate Unit 13, appreciated the opportunity to reconnect with friends.

That’s a big reason why she came back to the annual event Saturday for the fifth or sixth year.

“I don’t always get to see these people,” said Luu. “You get so busy, it’s hard to get out. So something like this is really cool, to bring us all out together and do some fun stuff.”

