

FRIENDS build a community rich in blessing Buddy Walk funds benefit variety of Down syndrome causes

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Lauren and Jared Lucey got married in September 2011, and were thrilled about adding a baby to their new family when they found out Lauren was pregnant last spring.

But the Columbia couple's outlook changed when they learned in July that their unborn son, Kyle Francis Lucey, would be born with Down syndrome.

"I think we'd been planning this picture-perfect family, and it felt like someone ripped that away from us," Jared said.

But after talking about the diagnosis, they decided it should not change their excitement about the pregnancy.

"We wanted a baby. We wanted a healthy child to raise," Jared said.

Although Kyle will be different, that will not change the love they already feel for the boy, who is due to arrive Dec. 26.

For the Luceys, the 11th annual FRIENDS Buddy Walk came at the perfect time.

According to President Denny Weikert, the acronym stands for Family Resource, Information and Education Network for Down Syndrome. The group started in 2000 with four families, and "now we support, on a regular basis, over 125 families," Weikert said Saturday, sitting on a Baker Park bench overlooking the Buddy Walk festivities.

Among them, 625 walkers helped raise \$53,587 this year, Weikert said. The funds go toward a variety of Down syndrome-related causes, including a teachers conference that provides new techniques for teaching children with Down syndrome in "a mainstream classroom." Others include family grants for medical bills and similar expenses, as well as scholarships for Down syndrome students seeking secondary education or non-Down syndrome students who want to study special education or a related field.

The Luceys wanted to get involved both to support those causes -- they were among the top-earning teams, with \$6,150 raised -- and to meet families who have already been in their shoes and are now raising happy, healthy children with Down syndrome.

"The support and love from people is amazing," Lauren said.

Jared said the experience was reassuring.

"Now we can't wait to come next year and to share Kyle with everyone."

Tish Walsh's daughter, Nikki, was one of the children who made the Luceys feel better about Kyle's future.

Although she was on a feeding tube for the first nine months of her life and didn't walk until she was 31 months, the 10-year-old takes ballet and tap classes, is a Girl Scout, plays an instrument and has been in stage productions at Deer Crossing Elementary School.

"It's like everything that you would want," Walsh said. "I think this is the kind of environment where you can see that ... the potential is there."

Saturday was the second Buddy Walk for Josephine Cicolini, of Lake Linganore.

Her 18-month-old daughter, Gabriela, was born with Down syndrome.

"This group gives so much back to our community," she said. "It's a huge sense of unity and family."

The Buddy Walk, which also includes activities such as dancing, a moon bounce and a petting zoo, is the



Photo by Travis Pratt

Participants in Frederick's Family Resource Information Education Network for Down Syndrome's 11th annual Buddy Walk make their way through Baker Park on Saturday afternoon in Frederick.

biggest FRIENDS event of the year, Weikert said. He is always happy to see the children, including his own son with Down syndrome, Noah, having a good time.

But he is even happier to see families like the Luceys learn what many of the attendees already know.

"These children are true blessings. They teach us a lot about life. How to slow down, how to enjoy everything that's around, and how to love. They love unconditionally."

Really, Weikert said, "we're the imperfect ones. They're the perfect ones."

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