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'Kids just like us': Event marks World Down Syndrome Day

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"These kids are just like us."

That was the message spread to dozens of supporters who came to a Frederick movie theater on Thursday night.

March 21 is designated World Down Syndrome Day, inspiring the advocacy group Family Resource, Information and Education Network for Down Syndrome, known as F.R.I.E.N.D.S., to put on a community awareness event. Their efforts captured the attention of the Frederick Police Department, Frederick County Sheriff Chuck Jenkins and other community leaders.

"I think it's really important as leaders of this community to be out here and interact with the families," Jenkins said during an interview.

Jenkins came to learn more about the advocacy group. The group invited Jenkins and others to their event at MDL Holiday Cinemas, where attendees watched two documentaries. They also mingled with the parents of children with special needs.

Alderwoman Shelley Aloï was also in attendance on Thursday along with Frederick Mayor Randy McClement, who proclaimed March 21 as World Down Syndrome Day in Frederick.

In its infancy, F.R.I.E.N.D.S. consisted of a core group of families who participated in monthly meetings, community educational activities and family events. Now, the group has grown to a network of 125 families.

"Inclusion is the biggest thing we are pushing for," said Denny Weikert, president of F.R.I.E.N.D.S.

Their message of inclusion is being circulated throughout Frederick County Public Schools through a poster campaign, Wiekert said. In addition, their message continues to be spread through monthly meetings and activities.

"We just want more people to be aware of what F.R.I.E.N.D.S. is doing in the community," said Katie Routzahn, the organizer of Thursday's event. "Individuals with Down syndrome are striving. They are contributing members of society"

Routzahn and other members of the advocacy group also want to break stereotypes about children with Down syndrome.

"When I was kid, children with Down syndrome were rarely seen, so now it is kind of nice to see them out and involved," said Bob Walsh, F.R.I.E.N.D.S. vice president.

Each year, F.R.I.E.N.D.S. hosts a Buddy Walk, which raises money for education, research and support efforts related to Down syndrome.

For more information, visit <http://friendsoffredco.org>.



Photo by Bill Green

Staff photo by Bill Green Nikki Walsh and her mother, Tish, left, hand out programs at the celebration of World Down Syndrome Day sponsored locally by the advocacy group known as F.R.I.E.N.D.S. At center is Mary Burdette. Frederick Mayor Randy McClement proclaimed March 21 as World Down Syndrome Day in Frederick.

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