

Autism Speaks Walk returns to Orangeville this weekend

By **Sam Odrowski**

The annual Autism Speaks Canada Walk is returning to Orangeville after the event was held as a car parade in 2021 due to the pandemic.

The fun-filled event is in its sixth year and takes place this Sunday, September 25, at Fendley Park from 10 a.m. to 12:30 p.m.

The walk is roughly three kilometres long and is open for everyone to enjoy and support, not just individuals with a personal connection to autism.

“You don’t have to have an autism connection,” said Walk organizer Karrie Daponte. “People assume they shouldn’t come because they don’t have connection but that’s what this event is for? the walk is all about learning to accept them [people with autism]. Not just include them, but accept them.”

For the event, Fendley Park will feature 13 fun mascots like Marshall from Paw Patrol and Elmo, race car drivers with their vehicles, several vendors, food trucks, emergency vehicle tours, prize draws, live music, and free food/refreshments.

The park will also feature a children’s area with face painting, Music Together Orangeville running activities, and karate demonstrations.

Dance Ability Movement, which teaches dance to individuals who are neurodiverse, will be at the event for a performance.

TSN Towing and charitable motorcycle group, Qwest Riders, who participated in the local Walk on Wheels Car Parade for Autism Speaks Canada in 2021 will be at the event as well.

Daponte said that the Autism Speaks Canada Walk is a judgement free space and a great opportunity for children with disabilities to feel welcome and have fun.

“A lot of parents don’t feel comfortable taking the kids up in the community? but this is somewhere where everybody can go,” she noted.

Daponte’s daughter, Yazime Wilson-Daponte is this year’s Autism Speaks Canada ambassador for Orangeville and the surrounding area.

She’s been fundraising for this year’s walk since February through bottle drives, Bubby stands, raffles, and a “Celebrity Server Night” at Boston Pizza. So far, Wilson-Daponte has generated around \$1,000.

Her team shirt for the Autism Walk reads “Born to Stand Out”, and her message with respect to inclusion and acceptance of people with special needs is “Don’t judge me by my cover.”

“Don’t judge. Don’t stare. That’s it,” Wilson-Daponte told the Citizen.

The walk has been made possible through many generous sponsors in the community who have both donated monetarily and offered products in-kind.

Tim Hortons, McDonalds, PepsiCo, and Pure Water Canada are providing free drinks, Lavender Blue Catering is providing free snacks, and Toppers Pizza Orangeville will be handing out free pizza.

Goodie bags filled with coupons and items from local businesses and crafters are also being provided to the first 200 attendees.

?It's a fun filled family event and it's a community event for everyone? all ages,? Daponte noted.

The event is rain or shine.