

Dufferin Autism Walk to return to Orangeville's Fendley Park this weekend

By **Sam Odrowski**

The 9th Annual Dufferin Autism Walk is coming back to Fendley Park in Orangeville this weekend.

On Sunday, Sept. 28, registration opens at 10 a.m., opening ceremonies at 10:45 a.m., and the walk gets underway at 11 a.m., with one-to-three-kilometre walking routes on the park's trails.

Registration for the walk is free this year, but funds will be generated from a raffle table, silent auction, and sponsorships.

"It's a free, fun-filled event for all ages and abilities, [with] free Tim Hortons and a slice of pizza from Toppers Pizza Orangeville," said Karrie Daponte, walk organizer.

"Events like this are imperative to bring to our community. Not only for the ASD community but for the whole community. It's an inclusive event for all."

The event will feature crafts, activities, dance demonstrations, music performances, special guests, an IODE Child Fingerprint Clinic, emergency vehicle tours, a silent auction, a raffle, a vendor area, and goodie bags.

This is the first year that the Dufferin Autism Walk is collaborating with Tori Spiteri, who owns Inclusive Perspectives Sensory Gym in Orangeville.

The gym offers a safe and welcoming sensory space for children and youth with autism. The proceeds raised through this year's walk will go towards funding social groups at the gym and in the community.

"We hope to host a few groups, given [that] the ages of our ASD walk participants [range from] one to 60, approximately. These group sessions will be free, and it's a time to meet new friends and be with families of similar diagnoses," explained Daponte.

Orangeville resident Theo, 6, who has autism, is this year's walk ambassador. He will lead the walk when it takes place on Sunday.

"He is our face and voice for the walk. His father, Mark, will speak at the opening ceremonies briefly about his son and their family's journey," said Daponte.

There will be goodie bags for the first 100 special needs individuals and their siblings who turn out to the walk.

The walk is a rain-or-shine event.

"We hope the walk will be as successful as in the past with 250-300 people in attendance. This year has come with many changes and challenges as we, the Dufferin Autism Committee, collaborated with Inclusive Perspectives Sensory Gym and [are] trying to navigate this year's walk," said Daponte. "Together, our mission, is like all other years ultimately bringing the community together, spreading and increasing education, awareness, and most importantly, acceptance."

The first walk for autism in Orangeville was held in 2017, and it has been an annual event since then. However, the name of the walk changed this year to Dufferin Autism Walk from Autism Speaks Canada Walk.

The charity, Autism Speaks Canada, ceased operations on Jan. 31 of this year.

To date, roughly \$1,000 has been raised for the walk through two fundraisers held earlier this year and vendor fees. M&M Food

Market in Orangeville held a fundraiser, and a Boston Pizza Celebrity Server Night helped generate funds.

Daponte noted the importance of the autism walk for local families and the autism community.

?For the ASD community, it's a time to come to an event in the community that they might not necessarily [have the opportunity to attend] if not hosted by us. Our events, they know, will have people whom they can relate to and know their life and what they endure on a daily basis raising a child with special needs,? Daponte said. ?It's a time to feel comfortable in your surroundings and not be worried about anyone staring, judging your parenting, and the ASD individuals can be themselves, making movements and any noises freely.?

Fendley Park is located at 11 Fendley Road, Orangeville.

Registration for the walk can be done at the event or in advance by visiting tinyurl.com/ybmabvk3.