

## **LEARNING EXPERIENCE AUTISTIC CHILDREN FROM SOUTH BROWARD ENJOY A DAY OF ACTIVITIES PUT ON BY THE CUB AND BOY SCOUTS**

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

With a little help, six-year old Harry Thomas of Hollywood was able to pot a plant to take home.

While that task may not have been a big deal for other kids, for Harry, who suffers from autism, it was a big accomplishment.

Harry and several dozen other autistic children from Miami-Dade and Broward counties participated in a scouting fair at North Miami Beach's Greynolds Park on Saturday, October 5.

"There are very few activities where it is easy to integrate special needs kids into regular activities," explained Hilda Bennett who helped organize the event.

"Autistic kids do not behave like other kids," she explained. "Many do not talk, they do not follow directions and they are sometimes hard for parents to control."

"Their core difficulty is in interrelations with others," Bennett said. "They have trouble with conversation, maintaining eye contact and reciprocal interaction."

"However, when they feel that they are welcome and accepted, they do well," she said.

Children who attended were able to take part in woodworking, sports, knot tying, photography, arts and crafts and other activities.

The day was also instructive for the cub and boy scouts who manned booths. "It was an opportunity for them to learn a little more about something they do not know much about," said Tony Santos, a North Miami Beach scoutmaster who developed the idea for the event.

"What you think is easy is going to be difficult for these kids," Santos explained to scouts and leaders from a dozen troops that volunteered to put on the program.

"I hope that it makes us more sensitive," Santos said. The scoutmaster said that the idea was to keep activities fun, simple and active.

Parents said that they were looking for more opportunities for their children. "I want so see if I can get Harry into a Boy Scout troop," said Harry Thomas' father, also named Harry.

“Harry is doing well in school, but he doesn’t have a brother,” explained Jacqueline Thomas. “It would be good for him to be around other boys where he could have fun and be active.”

“He could also learn to be independent,” added father Harry.

Most autistic children can fully participate in scouting programs according to Lisa King-Tyson of Pembroke Pines who is a professional District Director with the Pioneer District of the Boy Scouts of America.

“Our scouting program is molded to give an autistic child a full experience,” said King-Tyson who worked with special needs scouts in Jacksonville for 12 years before moving to south Florida two years ago. “That’s because it depends on parental involvement and it works with professional leadership,” she explained.

While scout officials are considering the establishment of a special troop for autistic children, many parents and leaders encourage such children to mainstream into regular scouting units.

“Tony (Santos) has a special needs child in his troop and the kids don’t notice it,” explained Bennett who is also the parent of an autistic child. “They don’t make an issue of it and the child is welcomed and encouraged to take part.”

“These children need to socialize in an accepting environment,” Bennett said. “We have found that in the schools when regular kids reach out to autistic kids, all of the kids benefit. They learn patience and acceptance.”

Parents welcomed the event as an alternative activity for their children. “We are always trying to find groups for Harry,” said Jacqueline Thomas. “It’s difficult to find them when you don’t know where to look.”

“I’m interested in getting my son more involved with nature and cub scouts,” affirmed Eva Curnow of Pembroke Pines whose eight-year-old son Cameron is autistic. “I hope that they form a special needs troop.”

“Parents like to know what is going on and what’s available for their child,” agreed Linda Demos of North Miami Beach who is a board member of the Davie-based Casi’s Quest, a project that helps inform parents of options and funds research.

Leaders hope that the recent event will help parents know that scouting welcomes their children. “If you see a family with an autistic child, you would know that their needs are significant,” explained King-Tyson. “They don’t get to experience everything we experience. So, making this event available is what scouting is all about.”

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