

Opinion

Much accomplished in Down Syndrome Awareness Month

BY ALISON SMITH

I love November. The cool crisp air along with the promise of holiday gatherings with family and friends warms my heart. It also gives me the opportunity to reflect on all that our community accomplished to honor Down Syndrome Awareness Month in October this year.

My 23-year-old daughter has Down syndrome and lives her life to the fullest. Our journey has not always been easy, but by God's grace and support from friends, dedicated teachers and the Centre Region Down Syndrome Society (CRDSS), a regional non-profit organization on whose board I serve, it's

been gratifying.

Small, mighty and only 17 years old, CRDSS embraces the objective that "together we create a world where people with Down syndrome have limitless opportunities to live life to the fullest."

A notable program of CRDSS is the For Good Troupe that, through performance arts, cultivates speech skills, independence, empowerment, and cognitive development in performers of all ages who have Down syndrome. I have watched with pride over the years as this stage experience has led to a tremendous amount of confidence building and social skills in the Troupe players. It has been inspiring.

That poise has led my

daughter to feel secure in speaking at the recently held Buddy Walk, our annual celebration event and largest fundraiser of the year. The Buddy Walk was established in 1995 by the National Down Syndrome Society to promote acceptance and inclusion of people with Down syndrome and is held across the United States. Our Buddy Walk this year brought together over 300 people at Medlar Field for a common cause and great celebration.

Then in late October my daughter was invited to present at the tribute from the Centre County Board of Commissioners, as they awarded a proclamation to the CRDSS. The proclamation recognized October as

Down Syndrome Awareness Month and encouraged all citizens to become familiar with the CRDSS mission of advocacy, information and support services.

At the ceremony my daughter stood proudly in the front of the packed room and read her prepared speech expressing gratitude, at which point she was made honorary commissioner for the day. One more milestone in her full and rewarding life.

During the month of October my daughter also participated in the WorkLink and Harmony programs at Penn State — both extraordinary opportunities. WorkLink expands Penn State's commitment to creating inclusive learning opportunities for people

with disabilities. It is a fully integrated, on-campus two-year certificate program that provides the opportunity for individuals with Intellectual Disabilities (ID) to participate in postsecondary experiences and education alongside their peers. This is tremendous preparation for full and rewarding adulthood.

Harmony is Penn State's performing arts program that helps integrate individuals, both with and without disabilities. Music and drama therapy have been used successfully by people of all ages and a variety of disorders and afflictions to better express themselves and their emotions. Harmony's student mentor approach builds relationships, promotes inclusion, develops emotional awareness, and improves communication and self-expression.

Another regional organization I serve is Strawberry Fields. I hope every reader is aware of the power of their Good Day Café, a

coffee shop that "brews opportunity" by providing meaningful employment for adults with disabilities. They believe everyone deserves a chance to contribute to their community, become more independent, and know they matter. In October, the café employed 14 individuals with disabilities and 20% of their staff has Down syndrome. Remarkable.

I encourage everyone residing in the Centre Region to invest in the work to help people with Down syndrome pursue their dreams. Enjoy a delicious latte at the Good Day Café and reach out to CRDSS to support and volunteer at our year-round activities. Explore the programs Penn State offers to make an impact in these lives. Your participation will fill our hearts and fuel our work.

Alison Smith is a member of the Centre Region Down Syndrome Society board.

