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Local organization hopes to fuel social, legislative change around disabilities

BY SAM A. MANAS Aug 11, 2018



A handmade decoration weighs down donation envelopes addressed to Missouri Disability Empowerment, a Columbia-based organization that advocates for people with disabilities, Saturday at Cosmo Park.

Molly Myers' job Saturday morning was to greet people.

She stood by a folding table that welcomed visitors to a kickoff celebration for Missouri Disability Empowerment, a new local organization. While Myers is also membership director for the organization, she has another, more important job: She's a mother.

Myers' son, Will, 7, is missing part of his corpus callosum, a series of fibers that connect the left and right hemispheres of the brain. Will needs regular therapy to learn behaviors that would come naturally for others.

The kickoff celebration, held at Cosmopolitan Park's ADA-accessible Lamb Shelter, was part of the group's first major membership drive. The group hopes to advocate for inclusion and state laws that better the lives of people with disabilities. By the 15-minute mark, some 35 people were wandering in the shade, clustering around tables and eating snacks.

Robyn Schelp, president of the organization, was wearing a T-shirt, mint green to match the decor, with the nonprofit's logo on the front and a quote from Helen Keller on the back: "Alone we can do so little," it read. "Together we can do so much."

Schelp's son has cerebral palsy and an undiagnosed genetic disorder.

"We went five years without getting the necessary therapies, and we had to move to Columbia just to get some therapies," she said.

In 2010, former Missouri Gov. Jay Nixon signed a bill into law requiring insurance companies to cover medically necessary therapies for autism. Members of the Missouri Disability Empowerment and their supporters believe this law didn't go far enough.

Before helping found Missouri Disability Empowerment, Schelp said she worked for two years with local legislators to file bills that would increase therapy coverage for people 18 and younger who have developmental disabilities.

She said she's faced resistance from the insurance industry, and none of their attempts have led to new laws. Supporters of the legislation say it would save the state money.

Schelp said she and others like her realized there were many other problems to be tackled.

With help from Rep. Martha Stevens, D-Columbia, Schelp helped create a family bathroom with an adult changing table in the state Capitol earlier this year. Recently, the group also published an "accessible restroom reporter" that lets users submit the locations of these

restrooms.

Partway through Saturday's event, Schelp acknowledged local legislators and candidates supported by her organization supported. Among those present were Rep. Chuck Basye, R-Rocheport and 4th District Democratic candidate Renee Hoagenson.

The group has begun to crowdfund and raised \$1,790 as of Saturday.

"Our hope is that we aren't limited just to parents or just to people with disabilities," Schelp said. "Inclusion benefits everybody. If you're in a world or in a classroom or in a workforce that doesn't have people with disabilities in it, you're not exposed to that, you don't learn how to relate and you don't benefit from the things that they'll teach you. And you can teach them. It's a two-way street."

MORE INFORMATION



Jacob Schelp, 12, has already made his mark in politics

Samuel Manas

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