

Newport Beach party raises \$200,000 for autism

Local businessman's own son was diagnosed 2 years ago, but the boy is improving.

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Hundreds of partygoers were dressed for a tropical party as the rain began falling Saturday night. Not to worry, the party's host told them.

"We do have a rain contingency," real-estate businessman Barry Saywitz told the crowd. "If it does rain, don't do anything – just go to the bar and get another drink. It's on me."

Saywitz hosted more than 600 people for An Evening for Autism, a fundraiser in his nearly 10,000-square-foot Newport Beach home. There were a half-dozen restaurants catering, hundreds of auction items, free shoe shining and massages and four live bands playing reggae and classic rock that echoed across several blocks.

Saywitz's own son was diagnosed with autism two years ago, and Saywitz wanted to throw a party for the support groups and educators who have helped Ryan, now 4, overcome learning and communication struggles.

Turning serious, he told the crowd Saturday: "These children with autism are at home and they have trouble communicating, trouble learning, trouble in so many ways. But tonight they don't have trouble with friends. You are now a friend to an autistic child."

It was just three months ago Saywitz started making phone calls, always expecting tepid responses, always shocked at how eager people and companies were to be involved.

"The idea was to have it be tropical themed, like a Tommy Bahama event. So I called them. Got all the way to the president of the company in Seattle and left a detailed message. Didn't expect to hear back."

"Five minutes later, I get a phone call. Turns out the head of Tommy Bahama in Southern California has a son with autism, and he happened to be in the president's office, and he happened to hear the message while he was there. So we made them the keynote sponsor."

Other companies soon followed. The restaurants alone: Scott's Seafood. Tommy Bahama's restaurant division. Maggiano's. The Yard House. The Newport Rib Company. The Cheesecake Factory. Beach Pit BBQ.

"The goal is to raise (\$200,000) or more in one evening in 90 days of planning. That'd be a helluva accomplishment," he said.

That breaks down to about \$25,000 to \$50,000 for Talk About Curing Autism, a Newport Beach group and one of the beneficiaries. "Enough for us to run our entire Orange County program for a year," said TACA founder Lisa Ackerman.

But, Saywitz says, "the real underlying story is the services and the programs these organizations provide for people with autism. The goal is to get the money directly to these programs so they can expand or do things they couldn't before. One hundred percent will go directly to these organizations."

The beneficiaries:

- Easter Seals, which provides child development, job training and more for people with disabilities;
- Newport Beach Unified School District, which like most districts has felt the financial impact of autism;
- Autism Society of America, a national advocacy group that is in the process of establishing its first Orange County chapter;
- And Talk About Curing Autism, the national support group that was started in Newport Beach mom Lisa Ackerman's living room.

Of TACA, Saywitz says: "I've gone to several seminars and heard people from their organization speak, and they're proponents of medicine and alternative avenues in treating autism. With my son, we've tried a lot of different treatments and programs, and I'm a big proponent of the scientific side of things as well as the alternative medicine."

Of the other groups: "There's a growing need for services that aren't provided. It's going to be a growing problem, the more kids that are diagnosed at an early age. These kids grow up. They get out of preschool, and they (eventually) get out into the workforce. The services these different organizations do, although some are dissimilar, in a lot of different ways they compliment each other."

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