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- *By Lugene Hudson*
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## Can do

Often misunderstood, children with Down Syndrome live life like all others.



*Contributed photo* **More than 2,000 walkers head out on at Buddy Walk of the Valley held at**

**the Shops at Boardman Park. The event is a one-mile awareness walk that celebrates the abilities and accomplishments of people with Down syndrome.**

Nathan Campbell enjoys playing drums and guitar, baseball, shooting hoops with his older brother, Andrew, and dancing.

The 14-year-old also just happens to have Down Syndrome.

That's how Nathan's parents, Judy and Scott Campbell of Shenango Township, prefer to describe their son.

Every day, Judy looks for acceptance, awareness and understanding of the much misunderstood chromosomal condition.

First, there's the perception of language. She tells others the correct reference is "persons with Down Syndrome."

"That's one piece of who he or she is," Judy said.

The other part of the language element is doing away with certain terms like "retarded," she continued. The Campbells hope Nathan, who attends a

program through the Midwestern Intermediate Unit IV, will become as independent as possible and obtain a job.

"Nathan has a lot to offer," Judy said. "He is very accepting of everyone. If everyone could be as nonjudgmental as Nathan, the world would be a better place."

When Nathan was born, his mother was told by the parent of a child with Down Syndrome that, "Every child is gifted. They just open their gifts at different times."

Kelly and Chris Donadio of Howland, Ohio, also view their daughter, Marina, 6, as a gift.

After Marina was born, her parents immediately began seeking information.

"Even at the hospital, I was given dated material," Kelly, the mother of three other children, said.

Realizing little was available, the Donadios cofounded Down Syndrome Association of the Valley.

Marina always has astounded and pleased her parents with her achievements, and will attend a local public school on a trial basis in January.

"We knew there would be delays such as in sitting up, walking and muscle tone, but now she has become an excellent reader. She's off to a good start in life."

Communication also creates better understanding, Kelly noted.

"But sometimes, with acceptance, the more progress you think you've made, antiquated comments still come up."

There is little a person with Down Syndrome can't do, she explained.

"It just takes a little longer but they can hold a job, drive a car and get married. I can see Marina as an advocate. Until Marina proves to us she can't, we'll assume that she can."

Jodi and Michael Vaneman's wish is that people view those with Down Syndrome who for they are.

Their oldest son, Mikey, 10, is, in a word, happy. They also have a son, Bryan, 6. Mikey is especially content when music is playing, but also highly involved in swimming and equestrian programs. The youngster is in second grade at John F. Kennedy Primary Center where he attends regular and life skills classes.

“Every accomplishment may be small but it’s huge for him,” Jodi said.  
“All he wants as a reward is a hooray.”

Following surgery for a lingual tonsil issue, Mikey’s verbal communication started to improve.

Jodi admitted that initially hearing that your child has Down Syndrome is stressful. “It’s hard to educate people until it’s in your own family. But don’t judge them until you get to know them for who they are.”



And to new parents of children with Down Syndrome, Judy says — “It’s scary at first, but don’t think of it as a death sentence. You’ve been given a gift and you have no idea how it will be packaged.”

