

Six-year-old Theo Opper selected as ambassador for this year's Dufferin Autism Walk

Written By SAM ODROWSKI

The Dufferin Autism Walk has a fresh face representing this year's fundraiser.

Orangeville resident Theo Opper, 6, is this year's walk ambassador, and will be leading the walk when it takes place on Sept. 28 at Fendley Park (11 Fendley Rd., Orangeville).

His parents, Mark and Brooke Opper, are excited to raise awareness with Theo and support the local autism community.

"We're honoured to have Theo be the face of this year's walk. We've lived in Orangeville since the year Theo was born (2018). He's had a lot of support from the community and we're honoured to help spread further awareness, acceptance and action," said Brooke.

"Awareness is the first step towards creating a more supportive and inclusive environment for autistic individuals and their families. Any funds raised will directly aid in achieving such an environment, helping families right here in our community impacted by autism."

Theo was assessed for autism in December 2022 and officially received a diagnosis in February 2023.

"We were fortunate to have a quick process as we got in just as the new Orangeville Pediatric Clinic opened," said Brooke.

She told the Citizen the main impact autism has on Theo is his communication.

"He's what some may call non-verbal, or has unreliable speech. He does have some language (he speaks through scripts), though you can't have a typical back and forth conversation with him," Brooke explained. "We continue to learn to effectively communicate with him as his language develops, working with Orangeville Speech and Language Clinic over the years as well."

Mark said he and his wife Brooke jumped on the opportunity to have Theo as walk ambassador, as it will help raise awareness, promote acceptance and educate the community on how autism may present itself in individuals. This helps to create greater levels of understanding amongst the public.

"Whether it's children or adults, I think the hardest part of navigating (autism) is just the misunderstanding. So, if we can be part of a positive influence in any way then we said, 'why not?'"

This first walk for autism in Orangeville was held in 2017, and it's been an annual event since then, organized by the same committee. However, the name of the walk changed this year to Dufferin Autism Walk from Autism Speaks Canada Walk. The charity, Autism Speaks Canada, ceased operations on Jan. 31.

This year, the Dufferin Autism Committee has partnered with Inclusive Perspectives Sensory Gym in Orangeville, which will receive any funds raised through the walk, and collaborate on how to use the funds to best support the local autism community. This could be in the form of free social groups at the sensory gym or free community events.

Registration for this year's walk will be free, but funds will be generated from a prize draw, silent auction and sponsorships.

"The mission for this year's walk is to bring the Dufferin Community together increasing education, awareness and acceptance of Autism and ASD individuals," said Karrie Daponte, who founded the Dufferin Autism Committee alongside Josh Hoskin.

There will be free refreshments before the walk and a free slice of pizza afterwards for attendees.

The walk will also feature demonstrations, activities, a vendors' area, and a resource area featuring local businesses and local organizations.

Brooke noted that being a parent of a child with autism can be isolating and overwhelming, so it's been valuable to have a community that can offer support and advice through challenges.

Having community is important not only for autistic individuals but for caregivers as well. We're grateful to all those in this community who have been part of our family's journey. Our hope is that any family that is on their own autism journey will feel and receive the support they need," said Brooke. "Theo's been involved with DCAFS (Dufferin Child and Family Services) since the beginning of our autism journey attending Entry to School, Early Learners as well as the STARS program, all of which have helped him grow and develop new skills. We're also grateful for businesses like Inclusive Perspectives that create safe spaces for families like ours."

Going forward, between now and the Dufferin Autism Walk, Mark said his family looks forward to actively advocating for the autism community and spreading awareness.

When the Dufferin Autism Walk takes place on Sept. 28, registration will begin at 10 a.m. and the walk will start at 11 a.m.

Registering in advance is recommended and can be done online at forms.gle/N7r5KpxXFx628yF66.

"This year Registration is free and no fundraising is required. We just want families to come enjoy a fun-filled event for all ages and you don't have to have a connection to autism to attend," said Daponte. "Everyone is welcome."