

LOCAL ORGANIZATION CHANGES THE LIVES OF SPECIAL NEEDS CHILDREN

By: Mariah Kilbourne

Lane was never able to join his neighborhood baseball team. Coaches thought that his physical handicap would prohibit him from being able to play with his peers. He was forced to watch them from the sidelines. Penny was never able to dance alongside her peers in community recitals. Dance instructors thought her physical disability would make choreographing routines too difficult. Beth and Maggie were never able to join gymnastics classes with their friends. Instructors thought their disabilities would limit their ability to participate.

Social exclusion like this was often a reality for many children with disabilities in the San Antonio area until the day Kinetic Kids was founded. Kinetic Kids transforms the lives of many disabled children.

FOUNDING OF THE KINETIC KIDS ORGANIZATION

Kinetic Kids was founded by two physical therapists, Kacey Wernli and Tracey Fontenot. In 2001, Wernli and Fontenot had a dream to change the lives of children with special needs. They wanted to provide children with any disability the opportunity to participate in physical and creative activities from which they may otherwise be excluded.

“Kacey and I worked as pediatric physical therapists in a clinic,” Fontenot, co- director and founder of Kinetic Kids, said. “We saw so many kids come to physical therapy that didn’t have any other options for exercise, activity, or the opportunity to do things like what their non-disabled peers were doing. We saw a need

to get them involved in activities just like their friends at school and other kids were doing.”

According to Wernli, co- director and founder of Kinetic Kids, she wanted to provide her patients with the opportunity to do fun activities outside of their therapy sessions.

With Wernli’s and Fontenot’s dreams put together, the idea for a Kinetic Kids organization began to take shape.

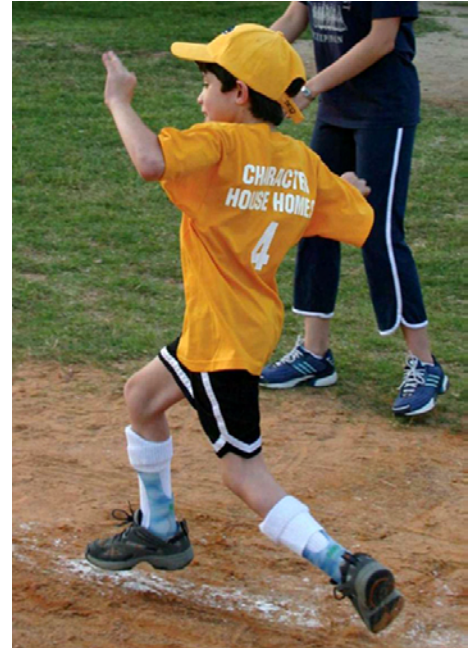
“When we first started our main goal for Kinetic Kids was a facility,” Wernli said. “We wanted a Kinetic Kids gymnasium where special needs kids could go work out with adaptive equipment and supervision from therapists or therapy students. Then the children would be able to do a fun exercise program.”

As Wernli and Fontenot’s ideas for Kinetic Kids continued to grow, they realized it would be difficult to serve the entire San Antonio community from a single facility. Their ideas for the Kinetic Kids organization began to shift.

Instead of a single gymnasium, Wernli and Fontenot dreamed that Kinetic Kids would begin with the formation of a special needs baseball team for the whole community.



Homerun Hitter: Danyale and her mother participate in Kinetic Kids T-Ball



Run the bases: Daniel participates in Kinetic Kids T-Ball

In 2001, that goal was achieved. That year, 10 San Antonio children with a variety of disabilities were members of the first Kinetic Kids T- Ball league.

Penny McGuire was one member of that team. Becky Cullins, Penny’s mother, remembers when she first learned of the Kinetic Kids organization.

“Five years ago, Penny needed new leg braces,” Cullins said. “We went and started seeing Kacey and she told us about Kinetic Kids. Penny really enjoyed T-Ball. I had not heard of any other place that it was offered before Kinetic Kids.”

EXPANSION OF THE KINETIC KIDS PROGRAMS



Hit it Over the Net: Wade participates in Kinetic Kids Tennis

According to Fontenot, by 2002, the Kinetic Kids T-Ball league grew to a team of 20 children. In 2003, Kinetic Kids served 60 special needs children in the San Antonio area and the programs offered by the organization expanded to gymnastics, art for all and dance. By 2007, Kinetic Kids offered 51 programs to 850 disabled children, 2 years old - 18 years old, in the Central, Northwest, and Northeast regions of San Antonio. Kinetic Kids offered many new programs by 2007 including: swimming, basketball, cheerleading, music, kinder music, sign language, mommy and me gymnastics, snow skiing and outdoor explorers. By 2007 Kinetic Kids also made wheelchair sports a part of the organization. Kinetic Kids offered wheelchair basketball, track and tennis.

According to Wernli, in addition to offering more programs by the year 2007, Kinetic Kids also offered varied levels of programming. Starting in 2007, the swimming, gymnastics and wheelchair sports programs had a sportsmanship level for children who need one on one assistance, a recreational level for children with physical limitations and a competitive level for children who can participate in the recreational level and want to compete. Each level of programming pairs the disabled participant with a volunteer who can assist them in the activity as needed.

THE IMPACT OF KINETIC KIDS

Ever since the program began, Kinetic Kids has positively changed the lives of all who come in contact with the organization. The lives of the children who participate are transformed.

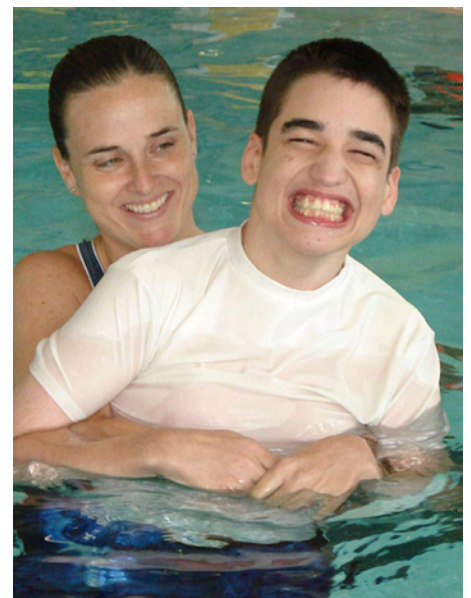
“Kinetic Kids has given Penny opportunities that I wouldn’t have been able to give her,” Cullins said. “It makes her really blossom. It’s amazing to see her come into being a teenager with these opportunities. The dance routine to ‘Beautiful’ is certainly a favorite moment. She was able to take that song after dance class and perform it in a school talent show. Teachers were crying and kids were crying- she got a standing ovation. It was the dance from Kinetic Kids. It was amazing to see her be able to do that.”

Kinetic Kids gives disabled children the chance to achieve goals that may have seemed impossible.

Beth and Maggie McGuire have been members of Kinetic Kids since 2005. They have participated in Kinetic Kids swimming, gymnastics, kinder music and outdoor explorers.

“The organization showed me what my kids are really capable of and what they are really able to do,” Julie McGuire, Kinetic Kids mother, said. “They can do things that any other kid can do. We really didn’t see that as a possibility before we came to Kinetic Kids.”

Lane Deml has also been a member of Kinetic Kids for three years. He has participated in Kinetic Kids swimming, T- ball and outdoor explorers.



Going for a swim:: Preston and Kinetic Kid program director Kate Castellano participate in Kinetic Kids swimming

“Kinetic Kids is wonderful,” Gale Deml, Kinetic Kids mother, said. “They found a niche for so many people to be able to do things that they could not do before. Before Kinetic Kids Lane was not able to participate in activities like this. The baseball would be thrown too hard. With swimming he did not have a class that understood his needs in order to be able to help him. With the one on one assistance he is able to participate. It has been wonderful for him.”



Go Team Go: Kadie and a volunteer participate in Kinetic Kids cheerleading

overall happier demeanor. After participating in Kinetic Kids they just seem to be more enthusiastic about life.”

It is important for the development of children to be included socially. Kinetic Kids promotes social inclusion of disabled children. Kinetic Kids also helps change the community’s perception towards disabled people.

“Kinetic Kids is one of our strong holds in the San Antonio community,” Fontenot said. “Kinetic Kids allows the general public to realize that this organization is important for kids’ development, for their self esteem and for their confidence levels. These children have the same aspirations that other children do. We hope this is a huge step in the right direction to educate the public about the needs of the special needs community.”

There are not many other sports and recreational opportunities for disabled young adults in the San Antonio area other than Kinetic Kids. As long time Kinetic Kids participants reach young adulthood, Kinetic Kids is allowing them to remain in the organization. Participants can now be a part of Kinetic Kids until they reach 21 years old. The age extension allows the friendships, skills and positive life changes that have developed because of participation in the organization to continue.

Kinetic Kids hopes to continue changing the lives of those with special needs well into the future. They plan to offer more programs and expand beyond the San Antonio area in upcoming years. For more information on the non- profit Kinetic Kids organization visit www.kinetickidstx.org. Schedules, registration information, and program details can be found on the Web site. Kinetic Kids can always use the help of more volunteers. Volunteer registration forms are also available on the Web site.



Exploring Nature: Hannah participates in a Kinetic Kids Outdoor Explorers day with coordinator Chuck Smith

All Photos Contributed by: Natalie Henry, Kinetic Kids coordinator