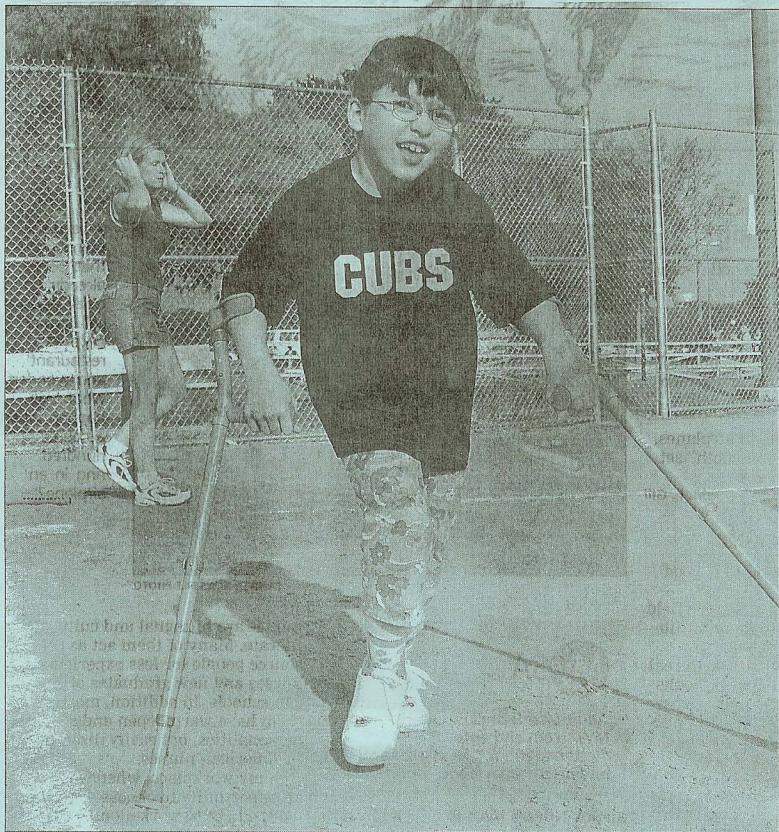


POWER PLAYERS



COURTESY PHOTO

Danielle Bitner, 9, is among T-ball players with the Kinetic Kids program in the spring.

A chance at bat

Disabilities are opportunities for Kinetic Kids.

By JOHN MACCORMACK
EXPRESS-NEWS STAFF WRITER

Area children with disabilities who participate in the after-school and weekend programs of Kinetic Kids have a chance to dance, paint, play T-ball and even perform gymnastics — like just about any other kid.

For Diana Neal, a bright 16-year-old who sings in the choir and navigates the corridors of Reagan High School with a walker, Kinetic Kids provided something far more important.

"It allowed Diana to meet someone who is 16 and also uses a walker. It gives her the opportunity to not feel like the only disabled person in the room," said Diana's mother Peggy Neal. Diana's friend, Mariah Kilbourne, lives across town.

Founded in 2001 with a T-ball team of 10 children, Kinetic Kids became a nonprofit organization last year and serves more than 140 special-needs youths with 18 programs, leasing space from schools and facilities around town.

Kinetic Kids is one of many area nonprofit organizations the San Antonio Express-News is featuring in its annual Grace of Giving campaign, which runs daily through Christmas.

"We're sort of like the league for special-needs children, but we don't have our own location," said co-director Tracey Fontenot. And more programs

are on the way.

"In January, we're starting a cheerleading class at Flip City, and a music class at Trinity United Methodist Church using instru-



ments donated by Alamo Music. We hope to start karate and swimming next summer," she said.

Parents, students from the University of Texas at San Antonio and the University of Texas Health Science Center, and other volunteers help run the programs. Some require a helper for each participant.

Fees paid by the children cover about a third of expenses. The rest comes from grants, donations and fundraisers. The directors donate most of their time.

"It started as a labor of love, but now we're paying ourselves for 20 hours a week," said Fontenot, a physical therapist like director Kacey Wernli.

The program accepts children 2 to 18.

This Christmas, Kinetic Kids' wish list begins with gymnastic equipment, such as a balance beam, floor mats and mini-trampoline, and includes T-ball equipment, art supplies, pompoms and a digital camera.

Pediatric neurosurgeon Arthur Marlin, now a member of the group's governing board, got involved because he knew both Wernli and Fontenot, and he saw his patients benefiting from Kinetic Kids programs.

"What they do is phenom-

enal," he said. "You have kids who can hardly walk, tumbling and doing gymnastics. The time I went to a recital, I could not believe what these kids were doing."

Marlin, who treats children with cerebral palsy, brain tumors, and congenital brain and spinal anomalies, said the Kinetic Kids activities are therapeutic on several levels, not the least of which is for the children's self-image.

For Michael Wilshek, 9, who has cerebral palsy and uses a wheelchair, Kinetic Kids opened the door to competitive athletics, namely T-ball.

"The first year, he wasn't really sure. It was totally new. He had never played sports," recalled his mother, Gail.

"But by the second year, he was cheering every time we pulled into the parking lot," she said.

Michael, a third-grader at Lackland Elementary School, is already thinking about his third T-ball season, still months away, and his mother says he can't wait.

To learn more about Kinetic Kids, visit its Web site at www.kinetickidstx.org or call (210) 748-5867.

Registered nonprofit agencies interested in being featured in the Grace of Giving campaign can call the Express-News Community Relations Department at (210) 250-3600.

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