

Noah's Endeavor

MARCH 2013 WINNER - 1,730 VOTES

It began with a game of baseball. It was a way for Shelly Voelker's son, Noah, to socialize with friends, despite the cerebral palsy that his doctor said would hold him back.

Fourteen years later, Noah's game of baseball has transcended the field; it has become a community lesson on diversity, acceptance and the power of unconditional love.

Noah's Endeavor, a local charity that hosts recreational activities for all ability levels, has won March's SunState Federal Credit Union's \$1,000 award. Following



Prize winner's check from SunState

Voelker's nomination, it won with 1,730 "likes" on the charity contest Facebook.

After Noah's passing four years ago, the organization now continues in his honor, hoping to keep

his spirit of inclusion alive. It has expanded from the single season of baseball to now include year-round recreational activities, such as basketball, bowling, soccer and swimming.

Many of the members who come out for the games have developmental or physical challenges. But the Voelkers stress that all activities are open to anyone. Volunteers often help at the games, alongside siblings and parents.

Noah's Endeavor offers a safe space to teach participants about the diversity among communities.

"I love that they're going to grow up believing that there is a wide range of abilities," Voelker said. "And that it's completely normal."

Charlotte Ravel's son, Daniel, also has cerebral palsy and has been involved with Noah's Endeavor since the first season of baseball.

Now 17, Daniel still comes out to the games. He plays baseball in his wheelchair, and a volunteer helps him around the field. As he rounds second base,

Daniel's grin runs ear to ear.

Voelker said that she sees positive effects like this in many of the participants. It is not about learning the rules of the game or becoming competitive, but about socializing with friends and practicing skills such as sharing or waiting your turn.

Voelker said she hopes winning the contest will make more people in the community aware of the organization. Many families are looking for ways to involve their children in a program such as Noah's Endeavor, but have lived in Gainesville for years without knowing it exists.

With the prize money, Voelker hopes to offset expenses for the members' favorite activity of the year – swimming, the only activity that costs money to participate. But Voelker is working toward making it free for everyone.

Voelker said the swimming activities, called "Aquabilities," are particularly important so that members can learn water safety. Long term, Voelker said she would love to open her own swimming facility that accommodates all types of families and needs.

As the 2013 baseball season wraps up, Noah's Endeavor will continue to honor Noah's spirit of friendship and acceptance in the same place it all began — out on the field. ■

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