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RiverKings Celebrities Back Autism Fundraiser

By: Sylvia Petty
 SOUTHAVEN, MS --- The Mississippi RiverKings hockey club was among the ranks of 34 teams who filled the tournament schedule of Wayne Bartley's 2011 Autism Golf Tournament to raise about \$10,000 for DeSoto County Schools' Autism Early Intervention Program at The Club at North Creek in Soulhaven on Thursday, May 19th.

For the RiverKings, the appearance is an annual one. After the first several years of playing in the tournament, the hockey team partnered with Bartley to create "Assists for Autism," a pledge-based charitable giving fund at Community Foundation of Northwest Mississippi. During the hockey season, the team appeals to friends, season ticket holders and patrons in efforts to raise funds and awareness for autism.

"Autism is the fastest growing developmental disorder in the country," RiverKings General Manager and Governor Ab Mattice said. "The RiverKings are proud to be able to promote awareness of autism by supporting this event as well as the Assists for Autism charity pledge program. It's a great cause and we want to help families who are dealing with it."

Bartley, whose son Justin has autism, founded the tournament and organizes it every year.

"Everything for the event was donated, so 100 percent of the entry fee went directly toward helping these special kids," Bartley said.

"In 10 years this tournament has donated over \$245,000 to DeSoto County Schools to provide our children with the best intervention tools available so they can have every opportunity to reach their developmental potential."

The schools have made good use of the money: Gov. Haley Barbour recognized DeSoto County Schools Autism Early Intervention Program as the model for autism education and intervention in Mississippi.

"We have been able to hire more personnel, provide more training for the staff and parents, and fund camp scholarships with money from previous tournaments," Bartley said. "The golfers' participation and contributions have made a significant difference in the lives of many families who have to live daily with the challenges of autism."

The DCS program serves 300 children; just less than half attend the pre-tournament golfers' luncheon. Because such mystery surrounds the disorder, Bartley says the idea is to encourage the public to get to know children with autism and see the ways they are similar to every other kid, and also the ways they are appreciably unique.

"The main thing I would like for people to take away from this tournament is that a lot of these kids are the same as any neurotypical kid," Bartley said. "These kids may have some special skills, but they are loving even though they are different. Our goal is that the funds that are raised can be put in the hands of professionals who can best figure out how to help them."

Autism is a general term used to describe a group of complex developmental brain disorders. It is estimated that one in every 110 children – and 1 in every 67 boys – is diagnosed with autism, making it more common than childhood cancer, juvenile diabetes and pediatric AIDS combined.

The cause of autism is unknown. According to Autism Speaks, the answer is complex: just as there are different levels of severity and combinations of symptoms in autism, there are probably multiple causes. Currently, scientific evidence points toward a combination of factors causing autism, including multiple genetic components that may cause autism, or possibly when combined with exposure to yet-to-be-determined environmental factors. Timing of exposure during the child's development (before, during or after birth) may also play a role in the development of the disorder.

Autism Speaks states there is a growing interest among researchers about the role of the functions and regulation of the immune system in autism, both within the body and the brain, and piecemeal evidence over the past 30 years suggests autism may involve inflammation in the central nervous system. There is also emerging evidence from animal studies that illustrates how the immune system can influence behaviors related to autism.

Of course, the day wasn't just about the cause. The featured entertainment was golf, and there were plenty of things to make an avid golfer happy, such as a Callaway contest prize, and on-course beverages and hors d'oeuvres.

To donate or volunteer, contact Bartley at 901.550.1351 or BartWB@aol.com.

Maddox Hockey, Inc. is a for-profit entity created by the Maddox Foundation as a program-related investment to further the Foundation's charitable work and promote tourism and economic development in the region, including the viability of the Desoto Civic Center. The RiverKings are supported by the team's fans, season ticket holders, corporate partners and program-related investments of the Foundation. To find out more about the RiverKings, call 662.342.1755 or visit www.riverkings.com.



2011 Autism Golf Tournament founder and organizer Wayne Bartley, left, visits with DeSoto County Sheriff Bill Rasco before the tournament at The Club at North Creek on Thursday, May 19th. The tournament raised \$10,000 for DeSoto County Schools' Autism Early Intervention Program and hosted just shy of 150 youngsters in the autism spectrum to a free lunch and hour of play before the golf outing.

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