The Friendship Circle to host annual Walking 4 Friendship walk, carnival

By Lee Stephens

The Friendship Circle will host its annual Walking 4 Friendship 3K walk and Community Carnival on Sunday, Mar. 18, starting at 9 a.m., at the Friendship Circle Headquarters, 8700 SW 112 St. in Kendall. Registration takes place from 9 to 10 a.m.; Walk, 10-11 a.m., and Carnival 11 a.m.-1 p.m.

The Walking 4 Friendship fundraiser welcomes more than 1,000 participants to benefit an organization that brings friendship, joy, and respite to dozens in the community who may often feel unfairly excluded from everyday activities because of their abilities.

The Friendship Circle of Miami is a non-profit, community-based organization dedicated to offering friendship and acceptance to children, teens, and young adults with special needs, regardless of their disability, while empowering teenage and young adult volunteers by building their leadership skills and fostering values of altruism and volunteerism.

The Friendship Circle offers a multitude of programs that help children with special needs develop skills in areas such as art, music and sports. It provides an opportunity for social connections among the participants, as well as their typical volunteer counterparts, which many of these children lack in their day-to-day routines.

The Friendship Circle provides assistance to all families with physically or intellectually challenged children, teens and young adults. The majority of participants, however, lie somewhere on the autism spectrum. One in every 68 children in the U.S. has autism spectrum disorder (ASD), a 30 percent increase from one in 88 merely two years ago, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Children with ASD often have severe deficits in social skills and verbal communication. In fact, the CDC notes that 40 percent of children with ASD are non-verbal. This can make social interactions challenging for this population as children with autism have to learn the social skills that come much more naturally to their peers.

“At The Friendship Circle, part of our mission is heighten the community’s awareness, sensitivity, and sense of responsibility to individuals with special needs,” said Nechama Harling, program director.

The Friendship Circle provides a compassionate and safe environment for these children to learn social skills, both amongst each other as well as with their typical peers who generously volunteer their time to become “special friends” with members of the program. In fact, some program members, such as Noah McPherson and Alexis Greenberg who are both on the autism spectrum, go on to become volunteers themselves.

Noah is 19 years old and has been a participant in The Friendship Circle for the past six years during which time he has developed a meaningful connection with his assigned volunteer, Dillon. Dillon has since gone on to college but the two remain the best of friends who write and call one another, as well as get together when Dillon is in town. Noah is now a teenage volunteer himself and has met his responsibilities with great enthusiasm and commitment.

Alexis is 38 years old and has been involved with The Friendship Circle for the past five years as both a participant in the Young Adult program and a volunteer with the teenage participants. She works part-time at the JCC and is a contributing member of the community, eager to meet friends and spreading comradery wherever she goes.

Noah and Alexis’ stories are just a small example of some of the amazing work The Friendship Circle does for members of our community with special needs. But, they need your help to continue to fund these local programs which you can do by participating, donating and/or walking in the Walking 4 Friendship Walk-A-Thon.

While donations are accepted, there is no cost to join the walk. Attendees who wish to fundraise are welcome to sign up as a team to walk with family, friends, school, and business associates. Food and refreshments will be available for purchase. Wristbands will be sold to enjoy unlimited rides and entertainment following the walk. All money raised during this event will benefit Friendship Circle of Miami.

For more information about the walk and sponsorship opportunities visit the Walk 4 Friendship webpage at www.walking4friendship.com or contact Nechama Harling at 305-234-5654, ext. 11, or Heidi Rutland at 305-234-5654, ext. 10, or via email at officeadmin@friendshipcirclemiami.org.