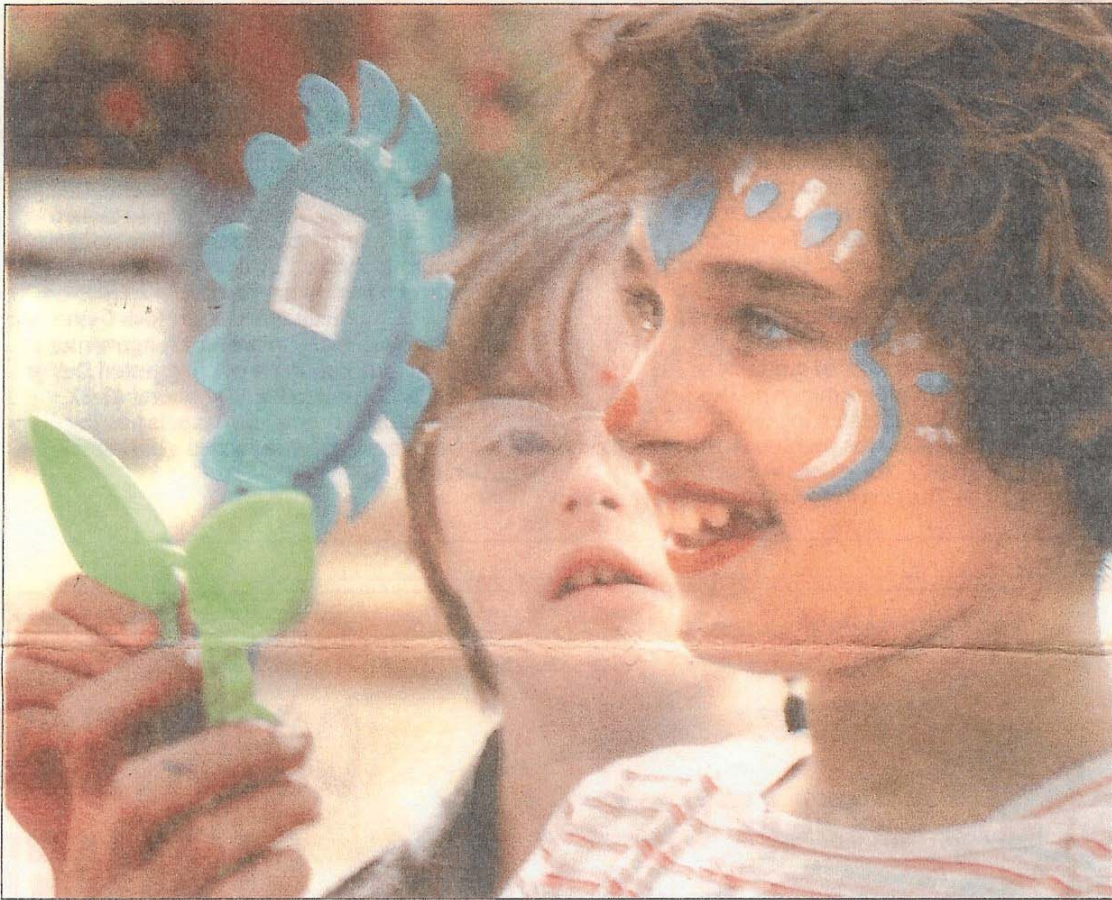




PHOTOS BY BOBBY COKER/ORLANDO SENTINEL

Meghan Hayes (left) watches as her sister Molly inspects her freshly decorated face Saturday at Lake Eola in Orlando. Their family was participating in Make 'm Smile, an outreach program sponsored by Nathaniel's Hope.

NEW PALS LIFT HOPES

Families with different lifestyles mesh along lake stroll

By SANDRA MATHERS
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

Don't know what a "Buddy Stroll" is? It works like this:

Family A — Matt Hayes, his wife, Diane, and their kids, Molly, Maddie and Meghan — stands in a VIP line with other families.

Family B — Tom Muckler and his kids, Donna, Danielle and Thomas — waits in a "Buddy" line with other families ready to be buddies.

As the two lines converged Saturday, the Hayes, the Mucklers and other families paired off for a wet but friendly walk around Orlando's Lake Eola. It was the 3rd Annual Make 'm Smile event sponsored by Nathaniel's Hope, an organization for special-needs children.

At first, the paired-up families didn't know one an-



Tom Muckler (from left), Maddie Hayes and her father, Matt Hayes, participate in the Buddy Stroll at Lake Eola, designed to raise awareness, acceptance and hope.

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other. An hour-and-a-half later, they knew a lot.

Muckler, his two college-age daughters and his teenage son learned that Diane Hayes, formerly a career woman in New York City, and Matt Hayes, a writer for *The Sporting News* magazine in St. Louis, met online several years ago and were married last year.

The Mucklers, who live in Ocoee, also found out the Hayeses moved to Orlando last year to find a free educational program for their children, who attend Princeton House Charter School.

Matt Hayes' three girls from a former marriage all have special needs.

Molly, 10, and Maddie, 9, are autistic, a developmental disability that affects their communication skills and social interaction. Meghan, 13, has Down syndrome, a form of mental retardation.

Family B, the Mucklers, juggled umbrellas as they circled the lake, stopping to inspect tables full of special-needs information and souvenir giveaways. They also helped keep an eye on Molly, who continually darted away on discovery trips of her own.

Family A, the Hayeses, juggled kids, tote bags and nonstop conversation on the way.

"It gives the girls a chance to be around kids who don't have disabilities," said Matt Hayes, 39.

About 1,500 VIPs and Buddies took part in Saturday's stroll.

Tom Muckler, 44, plant manager for Regal Marine, a boat-manufacturing company in Orlando, has participated in all three Buddy walks. For him, the event is both a commitment and a reality check: *What if his children had been born with special needs?*

Instead, Muckler is raising the quintessential American family. Donna, 21, is working her way through Valencia Community College and wants to finish college at the University of Central Florida. Danielle, 19, is a full-time student at Florida Atlantic University at Boca Raton. And Thomas, 14, will attend Ocoee High

School in the fall.

Muckler's boss at Regal, vice president of manufacturing Tim Kuck, started Nathaniel's Hope with his wife, Marie, in honor of their special-needs son of the same name who died in 2001, at age 4. The organization offers a variety of services, including free respite care, for families such as the Hayeses.

Nobody knows better than Diane Hayes, 39, how difficult life with special-needs kids really is. She left behind a job as a recruiter for a legal search firm in New York to become a stepmother and "female role model" for three young girls who struggle to communicate.

With her husband frequently out of town covering sporting events, she is often left alone with three demanding kids and her freelance, online recruiting jobs.

Consider dealing with a child who took three years to toilet train. Or three kids who require special diets, rarely sleep through the night and often wander off without constant supervision.

"When you want to do something, you shift gears," Diane Hayes said of her abrupt lifestyle change. "Sometimes you need a greater purpose in your life."

Diane Hayes isn't alone in learning to adapt to special-needs kids. In three years, the Mucklers have paired with three different families and sets of disabilities. And they're learning.

"It's easy [for parents] to be bitter, but I've never seen that here," Muckler said. "I have admiration for these parents. They are true heroes."

His kids agree.

"I've learned a lot . . . how different it [special needs] is from your life," Danielle Muckler said.

That's the whole idea behind the walk, Marie Kuck said.

"We're trying to build a bridge between two communities," she said. "We're trying to educate [buddies] and hope [special-needs] families walk away with hope and joy."

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