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Tonight, skies turn blue for a cause: autism

By Maja Beckstrom
mbeckstrom@pioneerpress.com

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Just as breast cancer awareness has claimed the color pink, so autism activists hope to stake out blue.

Beginning tonight, the top of the LaSalle Plaza building in downtown Minneapolis will be bathed in blue light as part of a worldwide effort to raise awareness about the increasingly diagnosed brain disorder.

To mark the second "Light It Up Blue" campaign, more than 500 buildings and monuments worldwide will turn blue tonight, including the Empire State Building in New York City and the Christ the Redeemer Statue over Rio de Janeiro.

This is the first year the Twin Cities will have a major building lit up.

Mike Wilhelm, a vice president at Zeller Realty, which owns LaSalle Plaza, is the uncle of two children with autism. He said he was happy to swap in colored filters on the 30-story office building's spotlights for the entire month of April.

The effort, which has spread via Facebook and Twitter, is spearheaded by the national research and advocacy group Autism Speaks to mark the fourth World Autism Awareness Day on Saturday. While the official campaign is designed to raise money for research along with awareness, families participating in the Twin Cities see it largely as a public plea for understanding.

A couple in Little Canada is holding a blue-themed cocktail party in honor of their autistic children. A Latino advocacy and support group for parents with disabled children — Discapacitados Abriéndose Caminos — is inviting

parents to light blue candles. Home Depot has partnered with Autism Speaks nationally to sell blue light bulbs.

Meredith Velick, whose son Alex has a mild form of autism, plans to put in a few blue bulbs at her home in Edina and string blue holiday lights, in the hope that someone might ask her why she's doing it.

"He's 9 years old, but he'll melt down like a 3-year-old," said Velick, referring to her son's sometimes tantrum-like behavior. "Which makes it difficult, particularly in school."

Last year, he played flag football and after making a mistake on the field, he spent the rest of the game lying on the sidelines, not speaking to anyone.

When he was younger, Velick was stung by comments and looks from bystanders who watched Alex melt down at the grocery store.

What does Velick wish for?

"For people not to be so judgmental of children's behavior," she said. "Because you just don't know what's going on. I look at all children through a different lens now. And I don't judge."

She also would also hope for people to recognize that autistic children come with strengths.

"All these kids in third grade are completely into 'Star Wars' and Legos," she said. "And Alex is an expert at both. So he's the go-to guy on that stuff. Last summer, he got really into fishing. If you ask him what's the record for a walleye, he'll tell you. He's a great kid."

Several organizations that work with people with

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autism also will be wearing blue Saturday, including staff at Courage Center and Midwest Special Services Inc. in Apple Valley.

Midwest's program director Jodi Meerovich calls autism an invisible disability. While Minnesota does not track the number of people with autism, about 13,000 children and youth in the state meet the special education eligibility requirements for an autism spectrum diagnosis. The umbrella term describes a range of behaviors that include impairments in social interaction and language and a tendency toward repetitive behaviors.

"They aren't people in wheelchairs or people who have physical deformity," Meerovich said. "A lot of our folks look like typical 20- or 30-something adults, but they don't have social skills or awareness of what's appropriate. And they're judged."

Her program works with about 15 young adults who have a diagnosis on the autism spectrum. Saturday, two clients will head to a weekly one-hour job cleaning a church. Another small group will go on a field trip to the Minnesota Zoo, wearing blue and broadcasting their message of inclusion.

"We want to create a society of tolerance and acceptance of people who are different," Meerovich said.

Maja Beckstrom can be reached at 651-228-5295.



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