



FocusFAA

A Race for Riley

March 9, 2011 – Last November, Rodney Peek received the gift of the Stickman.

It was the Thursday before Thanksgiving, and his 9-year-old daughter Riley, a special-needs student, was in school when, after months of encouragement, she picked up a marker and traced a picture of a stickman. Her teachers were moved to tears and quickly informed Peek's wife, Waynette, who volunteers at the school. She called her husband to share the news.

"I could hear the emotions in her voice," recalled Peek, an Atlanta traffic management controller. "I couldn't wait to see that picture. We have it hanging in our den. For those few moments, everything was right with the world."



Rodney Peek and his daughter Riley at last year's race.

Life inalterably changed for Peek and his family several years ago when Riley was diagnosed on her second birthday with mitochondrial disease, a medical condition that affects mostly children. The disease's symptoms include the loss of motor control, muscle failure, gastrointestinal disorders, and seizures. Peek and his wife soon found themselves in a cycle of doctor's visits, therapy sessions, hospital stays and persistent questions of how to help their daughter. They attended a class on fund-raising, and Waynette Peek decided to start a race for her daughter, now known as the Race for Riley, which raises money to donate to Riley's special needs school, The Joseph Sams School in Fayetteville, Ga.

The seventh annual 5K race — along with other planned activities including a bike ride and barbecue — will take place April 30 in Chattahoochee Hills, Ga. Last year, the race netted about \$70,000 in donations for Riley's school.

"She's helping our daughter," Peek said of his wife. "She's helping special needs children. It's therapeutic for her. She's found her purpose in life."

The Atlanta area chapter of the FAA Manager's Association and NATCA also hosted the second annual Riley and Friends Benefit Concert last Saturday in Peachtree City, Ga. The standing room-only benefit concert — which featured a live and silent auction and a performance by Aire Traffic, a band comprised primarily of controllers — raised about \$23,000,



Peek with his family, from left, Riley, Reese, Waynette and Graham

Peek said. A few years ago, Jack Allen, air space redesign manger in the Eastern Service Area and president of the FAAMA's Chapter 157, organized the event to support the school of his colleague's daughter. The first concert raised about \$19,000.



Runners at last year's Race for Riley

"In our first year of supporting the school, my chapter wrote a check for \$500," Allen said. "Last year, we took a big step and started our own event. Rather than just donate a check to the Race for Riley, we held our own jazz concert."

The race and benefit concert have become community events, attracting support from local residents, teachers and other parents of students at The Joseph Sams School, which was founded in 1984 and has about 70 students from toddlers to young adults who live with medical conditions such as autism and cerebral palsy, Peek said. The school has helped him and his wife with teaching Riley, who cannot speak and has difficulty with her motor skills, feed herself, put on clothes, and communicate through sign language, Peek said.

"When I'm having a bad day, and I'll go by her school, it makes me never want to complain about anything again," he said. "Riley is able to walk out to my car. Just the fact that she's mobile is a blessing. She can't talk, but she can grunt."

His daughter is unable to say the words "I love you," but she can sign the word "love" with her hand, Peek said. His two sons, 11-year-old Reese and 5-year-old Graham, are aware of their sister's challenges. Every year in the United States, from 1,000 to 4,000 children are born with mitochondrial disease. Some children do not live beyond their teenage years.

"That doesn't mean that's the case for our child," he said. "She may live much longer than that. That's our prayers."

His daughter's challenges have helped him put his own life into perspective, Peek said. One evening, he took Riley and her older brother Reese out to dinner, and his daughter's grunts drew stares from some other diners.



FAAMA Chapter 157 President Jack Allen dances with Riley at last year's benefit concert.



Riley with her brothers Graham (l) and Reese (center)

Instead, through the annual race, Peek and his wife have both received support from other parents of children with special needs and offered their own outreach.

“Every year that I do the race, I get handfuls of phone calls from other people who are struggling,” said Waynette Peek. “They immediately want to hear about Riley and how she’s doing...It’s a reminder every day when I’m with Riley. She’s my constant reminder of why I do what I do.”

And she is also a reminder of the little gifts that life offers, Rodney Peek said.

“We focus on the little blessings,” he said. “You look for the positives and you focus on those. She has taught us much about life and how generous people can be.”

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