

# You've Got A Friend

After School Bowling League Grows Into Organization for Special Needs Families.

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GEORGE O'DONNELL  
FRIENDS TO FRIENDS FOUNDER

By NOELE CREAMER  
for the **Tribune-Review**

It started nine years ago when George O'Donnell of Export wanted to find after school activities for his then 12-year-old son Georgie to attend.

With no leagues for special needs children to participate in team sports or other activities out of school O'Donnell started the Friends to Friends League that met once a week at Nesbit's Bowling Lanes in Plum. Friends to Friends seeks to bring special-needs kids and their families together with their non-special needs counterparts in a social environment

In the beginning, there were six special needs children like O'Donnell's son.

He bought special ramps and mechanisms to help handicapped children bowl. He paid for the equipment, and the weekly rounds at the alley, out of his own pocket.

He also spread the word about what he was planning, going to area school districts, the Children's Institute and the School for the Blind. At one point he was working three jobs to cover the expenses.

When the number of participating children soared and the bills for bowling came in over \$500 a week, O'Donnell reached out to his local state Representative Joe Markosek for help. With Markosek's assistance and that of O'Donnell's accountant, he was able to establish nonprofit organization status and be eligible to receive state grants. Now 165 children benefit from O'Donnell's programs.

Both have been instrumental in the development of Friends to Friends and have done outstanding jobs, O'Donnell said.

O'Donnell added baseball teams to the lineup for the children as well. Now children of all abilities are able to bowl September through May, take up baseball in May through June then attend a World Series in August that they host in Washington, PA Teams from around the globe come to participate in their Pony League World Series. When children without special needs come to the events, he pairs them with a special needs child so that a friendship can develop and

children can begin to appreciate each other for who they are instead of only noticing another's limitations.

"I started this organization with the intention of reaching younger children," O'Donnell said, noting that adults are certainly welcome to attend.

"So many people stared or looked at my son as if he had a disease. I wanted to reach younger children so that when they grew up, they will be more aware of people with disabilities and more accepting of the differences. I encourage anyone who's interested to attend our activities. Everything is free. I just want to create a place for these kids to come, be accepted and have a good time."

Now O'Donnell is in the planning stages to create a complex in Export for mentally and physically handicapped children and their friends and family on a 15-acre plot of land recently acquired by the city. Plans are in the works to build a state-of-the art rubber "miracle" baseball field, a regular grass field, a Par Three and putt-putt area with wheelchair accessibility throughout, a climber wall and volleyball courts - all in a park near the Italian Club off Old William Penn Highway in Export.

So far the Monroeville and Export Rotary Clubs have pledged to raise \$1 million towards the complex. In addition, Dr. Green of Upper St. Clair has personally pledged \$50,000. Another amazing donation is that of Lou Astorino, designer of PNC Park, who offered the services of his company, L.D. Astorino & Associates, Ltd. of Pittsburgh, in designing the complex pro bono. The Pirates also offered to help find funding to make the complex a reality.

O'Donnell estimates the complex, if building plans are approved, should be completed in about two years.

"I see this as a complex for 400-500 kids each year to visit, and then of course we will have bowling during the winter months," he said, noting he would like to see the complex as a haven for special needs children throughout the southwestern Pennsylvania area and beyond.

O'Donnell said part of the reason he wanted to include the golf courses and other activities in the park is that many children with emotional disabilities that participate on the baseball teams aren't able to wait their turns to play. This way they can go play putt-putt or use the climbing wall or play on the volleyball courts until it's their turn to play, he said.

"The best thing that's come from this is the socialization Georgie and the other children have gotten," O'Donnell said. "After baseball games, I've had parents come up to me and tell me they never thought they'd be able to see their son or daughter in a baseball uniform. This gives them a chance to be just like any other kid. The friendships they develop and the enjoyment they get from the activities make it all worthwhile."

Georgie, now 21, works part-time for the Westmoreland Blind Association helping with administrative duties and graduated this year from Franklin Regional High School. We are just so proud of him and everything he's been able to do, O'Donnell said.

*Noele Creamer is a freelance writer  
for the Tribune-Review.*