

Constable: 'Rock Your Socks' Down syndrome event celebrates inclusion



Parker Loebach, 5, helps distribute colorful socks to teachers at his Forest Glen Elementary School in Glen Ellyn for the annual "Rock Your Socks" celebration of World Down Syndrome Day.

(Brian Hill | Staff Photographer)



Burt Constable

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Last year's annual "Rock Your Socks" celebration for World Down Syndrome Day (<https://www.un.org/en/observances/down-syndrome-day>) on March 21 was more socks and less rock for schools in Glen Ellyn School District 41. Pandemic restrictions had just started, and students and teachers were at home adjusting to remote learning, said Scott Klespitz, principal at Forest Glen Elementary School.

That didn't stop Jason Loebach and his 5-year-old son, Parker, who has Down syndrome, from buying 1,200 pairs of socks and giving socks to every person employed in the district. Many recipients posted photographs on social media of them wearing the colorful socks, which all had images of goofy monsters.

"This year, they are more geometric," Loebach said of the socks he, Parker and Parker's sister, Alexis, 9, delivered in person on Friday.

With nearly all the staff and students back in the classrooms this year, Friday's sock distribution included masks and social distancing, but it also set the mood for Monday, when the district will celebrate World Down Syndrome Day in its five schools.

"I think it's fun for Daddy and Parker to come to my class and hand out socks," said Alexis, a third-grader. A #LotsOfSocks campaign has been used around the globe for years to bring attention to the special day.

Parker said he will wear his "PAW Patrol" socks featuring the canine characters from his favorite TV show when he celebrates the day with his prekindergarten classmates.

"We are truly an inclusive building," said Klespitz, whose school is home to the districtwide prekindergarten program for kids starting at age 3. "Parker's been a part of this the last three years. It's fun to watch his growth."

Loebach said he and his wife, Anna, learned of Parker's Down syndrome before he was born when doctors discovered a heart defect, which is common in children with Down syndrome. Parker had a cardiologist before he was born, and a successful heart surgery at 3 months old.

This is the 10th year that the United Nations has celebrated March 21 as World Down Syndrome Day as a way to advocate for the rights, inclusion and well-being of people with Down syndrome. Loebach said Parker's childhood isn't that different from the busy ones of his brothers

Evan, 21, a senior at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and Ethan, a 17-year-old Glenbard West High School senior who will attend the University of Illinois next year, or his sisters Katelyn, 15, Alexis, 9, and Amelia, 3.

"Instead of taking Parker to soccer, we were taking him to therapy," Loebach said. Parker still receives occupational, physical and speech therapy, as well as aqua therapy in a swimming pool. He also carries around a Samsung speech tablet (in a drop-resistant case) that allows him to touch symbols or pictures that represent a word or phrase Parker wants to say, and the machine will say it for him. His classmates sometimes use the device to communicate with Parker.

On Monday, when the district officially celebrates the Down syndrome recognition, Loebach, who is vice president of the school board, plans to talk with seventh-graders learning about genetics. "I bring Parker in with me," Loebach said, adding that a "cute kid" makes the presentation of Down syndrome more interesting.

Gather & Collect (<http://www.gatherandcollect.com/>), a vintage thrift shop at 473 N. Main St. in Glen Ellyn, is selling socks, with all the proceeds going to UPS for DownS (<https://www.upsfordowns.org/>), a Schaumburg-based charity started 35 years ago by parents and volunteers to provide training, education information and events for families. St. Mark's Episcopal Church (<http://stmarksglenellyn.org/>) and Faith Lutheran Church (<https://www.faithonline.org/>) in Glen Ellyn also are helping raise awareness and funds. People's Resource Center (<https://www.peoplesrc.org/>) in Wheaton is distributing those colorful socks to needy people. Rob Herbold, owner of House of Graphics (<https://www.printhg.com/>) in Carol Stream, donated a large "Rock Your Socks" banner and wrappers for the Loebachs' sock gifts.

"The resources are just incredible," said Loebach, explaining how attitudes about people with Down syndrome have changed since he was

a kid, with children once confined to special-education classes now being included in the typical classrooms.

"You have kids in classrooms learning with their peers. Everybody can learn from each other. Instead of thinking what they can't do, it focuses on what they can do and builds on their strengths," Loebach said.

"Kids are kids. They mesh well," Klespitz said. "They're very accepting of one another."

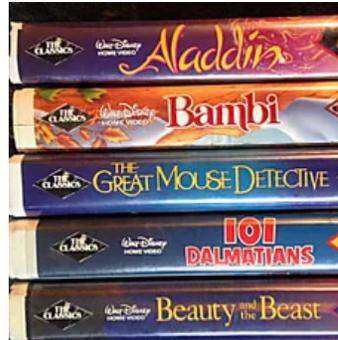
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