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EDITOR'S PICK

CENTERPIECE

FEATURED

Athens-Limestone lights it up blue for autism

Sarah Pavlik-Hernandez Apr 10, 2018



Johnson Elementary student Sebastian Ikner holds hands with Mayor Ronnie Marks and Ikner's teacher, Stacy Campbell, as William Odom prepares to release his blue balloon into the air.

Sarah Pavlik-Hernandez



The color blue is showing up all over Limestone County as officials, educators, residents and students bring attention to autism spectrum disorders throughout Autism Awareness Month, honored each year in April.

Since the beginning of April, the Limestone County Courthouse has been illuminated in blue. It will remain that way until the end of the month.

On Monday morning, Athens Mayor Ronnie Marks, Limestone County Commission Chairman Mark Yarbrough and Limestone County Schools Superintendent Dr. Tom Sisk gathered at Johnson Elementary School to sign a proclamation officially declaring April as Autism Awareness Month in Athens and Limestone County.

Students and teachers celebrated the signing by releasing blue balloons into an already clear-blue sky.

Overwhelmed by the crowd, 4-year-old Sebastian Ikner reached for the mayor's hand instead of a balloon. Ikner is one of 19 students in the pre-K–5 autism unit at JES.

“These kids are wonderful and so bright,” Marks said. “Events like this allow us to bring awareness to autism and recognize the teachers who work with autistic children and the children and families affected by it.”

Johnson Elementary serves as the county's autism unit, which means they accommodate elementary students on the autism spectrum from throughout Limestone County.

Equipped with two sensory rooms, two special education teachers and four teacher's aides, JES is set up with the goal of helping children with autism learn and thrive.

As soon as the balloon release was over, Special Education teacher Chris Rubolin herded her small group of students back to their classroom. Rubolin and her aides, Mandy Bowden and Marilyn Poarch, lead the autism unit for third, fourth and fifth grades at Johnson.

“Structure and scheduling is very important to autistic children,” Rubolin said. “Our classrooms are set up to give them comfort and stability.”

In one corner of the room, Bowden uses Goldfish crackers and gummy candies to teach Mavric Sanders and Sici Barrett how to count, while another student rocks back and forth on a school rocking chair.

Tablet computers are also big in Rubolin's classroom. Not only do students learn reading and math lessons on the devices, nonverbal students can use them to communicate with their teachers. A picture exchange communication system also allows students to select pictures off the board in response to questions.

A critical part of the students' daily schedule is sensory room breaks. Sensory rooms contain special equipment used to soothe and address needs some children have to either calm down or expend energy pent up during a school day. Johnson added a new pre-K sensory room to their program at the beginning of the 2018-2019 school year.

Rubolin likened sensory room time to a coffee break.

“Autistic children need down time or what we call 'brain breaks,’” she said. “Time in the sensory rooms help them focus and learn better.”

Every April, Autism Speaks kicks off their signature campaign "Light it Up Blue," beginning with the UN-sanctioned World Autism Day on April 2. Over the course of the month, thousands of iconic landmarks and buildings join the hundreds of homes and communities around the world to “light it up blue” in support of people living with autism, according to Autism Speaks.

According to the Autism Society of Alabama, more than 50,000 Alabamians are currently affected by autism spectrum disorders.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimate that 1 in every 68 people are affected by some form of autism disorder, making it the fastest-growing developmental disability in the U.S.

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