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Friendship Circle of Houston

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Friendship Circle is a branch of Chabad Outreach of Houston, a 501(c)3 charitable organization, an affiliate of Chabad of Texas and affiliated partner of the Jewish Family Service Disability Service Department. For more info see friendshiphouston.com

Dear Friend,

When you have a child, you expect them to be perfect in every single way. You count 10 fingers, 10 toes, you hear the first cries & you thank G-d for the miracle in your arms. Life goes on & you watch the milestones & enjoy your new bundle of joy. While some disabilities are visible at birth, others are not. Milestones are reached, and then, suddenly they are not. Your child is still the same wonderful child. Nothing has changed for them, but you...are forever changed. The dynamics of your family are changed. Education plans are changed & you worry what the future will bring.

Our son Zak attended a Jewish Day school & was thriving. Suddenly he stopped reaching milestones & he regressed into Autism. We got his official diagnosis when our Daughter Zoe was about to be born. The friends he had slowly seemed to disappear-my girlfriends instead of embracing me, made play dates with others & Zak & I withdrew from the community because we were in a different place that others could not comprehend.

We wanted to hold onto Judaism for him & Chabad Outreach- Friendship Circle as it always seems to do, REACHED OUT & embraced our family in a way that NO ONE in the Jewish community had ever done & they never have let go of us. They set up inclusive events with entertainment that is extremely creative, fun, holiday oriented & appeals to most special needs children. AND, they invited Zak to participate.

The Friendship Circle consists of 5 elements- the volunteers, the children, parents & siblings, staff & supporters. Without this core, the circle would be broken. The beauty of a circle is that it has no beginning, no middle & no end. It simply is round & lovely. Just like the round challah on Rosh Hashanah being the head of the year, the Circle of Friends is the heart of the Friendship Circle.

We've had many volunteers over the last 10 years. I'm not sure if I got more out of helping them see how to work with my son or if they did from learning to love my child. It's a toss up. Everyone wins when the circle continues. They came prepared with a plan, big hug & smile. Nothing gave us more pleasure than having a volunteer who includes the typical sibling as well. And respite is wonderful!!! My daughter, Zoe took it upon herself to volunteer. Eventually, it just felt natural for her to be a part of the circle & as a family; we have come full circle with a participant & an active volunteer. To quote Zoe, "Friendship Circle allows me to spend time with children & adults with various special needs. They have become my friends & are an extension of my family. We share Sunday circle, bowling, Friday night dinners & much more."

This year, Zoe & her friend Gabrielle are featured on the posters. As a family, we ask you to please consider walking with your feet & giving with your heart. If you can't be there on the day of the walk, you can sponsor the event, or sponsor a walker or make a donation & be a virtual walker. We look forward to seeing you on February 23, 2014.

By helping support the Friendship Circle's many programs for special needs children who live at home, as well as those who live in Texas State Supported Living Centers, you will help raise the necessary funds to continue and expand its mission. \$150,000 is needed to provide funding for the upcoming year's budget. The Friendship Circle's major yearly fundraising event is the Friendship Walk. Visit houstonfriendshipwalk.com for details and make the commitment today.

With Love and Gratitude,

Fran Katzenellenbogen