

'iHEAL' helps bridge the communication gap for students with autism

Elizabeth M. Steif
The Recorder

Leslie Weed wants to give kids with autism the power of communication by putting iPads in ESE classrooms around Northeast Florida.

Weed, who founded HEAL (Healing Every Autistic Life) in 2004, saw the benefit of the technology when she bought an iPad for her daughter Lanier, who is nonverbal and profoundly affected by autism. With the iPad, Lanier could communicate with her parents, siblings and teachers.

"She could speak to us through this," Weed said. "When you're teaching a child with autism, there's a disconnect in communication, and the iPad eliminates that."

She donated an iPad to Lanier's classroom at the time at Ocean Palms Elementary, and it's become a center for the students, she said.

Now she hopes to raise enough money through HEAL to eventually put an iPad in every special needs classroom in St. Johns, Baker, Clay, Duval and Nassau counties, as well as Camden County in Georgia.

"The need is unbelievable," Weed said, pointing out that there are nearly 50 classrooms in St. Johns County alone that would benefit from having an iPad.

At a cost of nearly \$500 each, though, getting iPads for every classroom in every county is a long-term goal. More immediately, Weed said, HEAL will work with school districts to identify the classrooms in schools with highest need and start there.

To help with fundraising, HEAL held an event at TPC Sawgrass to raise awareness of "iHEAL." Musician Jack Ingram performed, and a live auction raised additional funds. Over 300 people attended the event.

"If I could get an iPad to all of these teachers, I would be so happy," Weed said. She hopes to present the first donations in December or January.

With the iPads, "kids have control. They're in control of this life they don't usually have control of," she said. "They're heroic to get through every day in a classroom when there is so much going on."

For more information, visit www.healautismnow.org.



Jordan Simpson and Paula Collins



Chuck Hyman and Jan Healy



John McMahan, Lisa McMahan, Darla Neal, and Greg Neal



HEAL President Alan Pickert and Linda Pickert and HEAL Treasurer Vic Johnson and Lisa Johnson



Lisa Johnson and Linda Pickert



HEAL founders Leslie and Bobby Weed



HEAL founders Leslie and Bobby Weed