

Taking pride in disabilities



Photos by Carlos Javier Sanchez / Contributor

Adam Vela, the 2017 Fiesta Especial king, waves at paradegoers during the first abilitySTRONG Parade downtown. The parade traveled along Nueva, South Flores and West Houston and afterward was the 12th annual AccessAbility Fest at Market Square.

By Vincent T. Davis
STAFF WRITER

A procession focused on ending the stigma associated with having a disability wound through downtown streets Saturday.

At the front of the abilitySTRONG Parade, Hannah Watson and Cory Wyckoff stood through the sun roof of a Jeep Wrangler and waved to the crowd as the parade flowed from the Cattleman Square parking lot. Wyckoff's father, Todd, was at the wheel; his mother, Polly, kept pace beside the slow-moving Jeep.

Pride swept over both parents' as their son took part in activities they thought they'd never see.

Born with Down syndrome, Cory, 21, went through 14 surgeries in 14 years and on two occasions almost died. Their perceptions of his potential changed as inclusion opportunities increased as he grew up. His parents said Cory was voted a duke at homecoming his sophomore year and played

Inaugural parade offers 'beautiful and natural part of human diversity'



Heather Bragg, a 2017 Fiesta Especial duchess, takes part in the parade. More than 300 people made up the 21 entries at the official Tricentennial event.

on his high school basketball team.

Now he was standing tall in a lead parade car.

"We don't take anything for granted," Todd Wyckoff said. "It was tough and go for a long time. It makes us proud that he can be included in things."

From 9 to 10 a.m., the inaugural disability pride parade traveled a mile route along Nueva, South Flores and West Houston. It was followed by the 12th annual AccessAbility Fest at historic Market Square.

More than 300 people made up the 21 entries at the official Tricentennial event that featured walkers, floats, Texas wheelchair queens and the Bexar County Sheriff's Mounted Patrol. The parade was sponsored by disabilitySTRONG and the city's Human Services Head Start division and its Disability Access Office.

Mayor Ron Nirenberg and his wife, Erika Prosper, and their son, Jonah, served as grand marshals.

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PARADE

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Nirenberg said it was gratifying to see residents come to the parade and festival.

"It underscores the inclusiveness that we want to build our city on," he said. "It's often people with different abilities that are left out of the conversation of diversity. A parade is exactly the high-profile way to end it."

Diners at Cafe Alameda stared and pointed as the parade passed along Houston. Marchers tugged an inflated Tricentennial balloon ahead of Jefferson High School's band, high-stepping cheerleaders and Lariats dance team.

DisABILITYsa co-founder and executive director Melanie Cawthon said several cities have sponsored disability pride parades, including Nacogdoches.

"The parade is an expression of the belief that disability is a beautiful and natural part of human diversity,"

she said, "in which people living with the disability can take pride."

The nonprofit also sponsors Fiesta Especial, created for kids and adults with cognitive, developmental and physical differences. An official Fiesta event, the fair also includes the coronation of a king and queen.

After the parade, 2018 Fiesta Especial Duchess Jordan C. Allen stopped for a photo with Sheriff Javier Salazar and his horse, Sgt. Kenny. The retired race horse is named in honor of Sgt. Kenny Vann, who was killed in 2011 in the line of duty. Salazar said the agency's horses are a living tribute to fallen deputies.

"We reach out to every segment of the population," Salazar said. "We never pass up an opportunity to get out in the community for an event."

Jordan smiled and kept an eye on the horse as he nuzzled her shoulder.

"He was sharing some love on my sweater," Jordan

said as she walked with her mother toward Market Square, where the aroma of roasted corn drifted across the festival grounds.

The free fest included live entertainment, health screenings and more than 90 information booths that promoted products, programs and services to benefit people with disabilities.

Lindagail Balcome and Lourdes Casanove, both 69, steered their electric scooters past costumed superheroes flexing muscles with guests. They rolled through the square, past booths with titles such as "Disability Rights" and "Canine Companies for Independence."

Balcome said she enjoyed the festival, but said one thing was missing: more ramp access.

Polly Wyckoff said support of the community and events such as the parade have made a difference in the life of her son.

"Now, we know he'll be able to live on his own," she said, "and have a job."