

Hudson church hosts monthly dance for adults with special needs

A dance club for adults with special needs lets those with happy feet rule the floor.



Danielle Parise, 24, center, leans into her date, David Trocano, 25, while at the Happy Feet Dance Club's prom-themed event at Faith United Methodist Church. DOUGLAS R. CLIFFORD | Times



By Arleen Spenceley, Times Staff Writer

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HUDSON

A young couple crossed the crowded church hall, dimly lit for the date that had finally arrived: the Happy Feet Dance.

She held out her hand; he strapped a pink corsage to her wrist. That they both have Down syndrome didn't faze the crowd that surrounded them. All the people who showed up had shown up for the same reason.

"To dance with dignity," said Joe Foster, 57, who runs the Happy Feet Dance Club with his wife, Tammie, 51.

When Joe Foster talks about the club, he quotes Psalm 139.

(God) wove us in our mothers' wombs. (We are) fearfully and wonderfully made.

The club is for exceptional adults — adults who have disabilities and need caregivers. The monthly dance has its origins at Our Lady Queen of Peace Catholic Church in New Port Richey, where volunteers hosted it for 20 years.

The Fosters were regulars at the dance because their son, Ryan Wilson, 31, has Down syndrome. The dance's first organizers, who then were in their 80s, stepped down in June 2010, Foster said, and at first, nobody stepped in to replace them. The loss of the dance shook those who had grown accustomed to it.

"Most have no social life," Foster said. "It was like a divorce. A death."

When nobody had taken it over, the Fosters offered. "If we didn't do it, who would?"

So they moved the dance to their own church — Faith United Methodist — where Joe Foster and fellow volunteer Pearl Welch switch off each month as the dance's DJ. Each month's dance has a theme, and Tammie Foster and others decorate the fellowship hall the night before. On the second Friday of the month, up to 150 adults with special needs and their caregivers congregate to dance "where they're not judged," said Joe Foster.

"God loves everybody," he said, so part of the dance's purpose is to show that love to adults who have special needs.

At this month's prom-themed dance, 25-year-old David Trocano smiled while he danced the cha cha slide under red and green lights that flashed above the dance floor.

When he was a toddler, his doctors said he would never talk or walk, said his mother, Diane Trocano, 54.

"He would probably be in an institution by the time he was 8," she said they told her.

But David, who has epilepsy and cerebral palsy, is now in the adult education program at Marchman. He has worked at Publix as a bagger for seven years. He does talk, and he does walk, and he competes in cycling, swimming and golf in the Special Olympics. The second Friday of the month, he dances.

"When some of the guys at Publix talk about (going to clubs), he talks about going to the dance," his mother said.

He attends each month, she said, with his girlfriend, Danielle Parise, 24.

"It gets her out of the house," said Danielle's mother, Tammy Parise, 52.

Danielle was born with the umbilical cord wrapped around her neck, which resulted in a developmental delay. Parise said Danielle reads at a first-grade level and does math like a second-grader. She doesn't get to do some of what other adults her age can do.

But at the dance, her mother said, "she feels accepted. She belongs."

As this month's Happy Feet Dance neared its end, the music slowed. Danielle draped her arms over David's shoulders. She rested her head on his chest.

While they danced, David sang along with the song:

"You are so beautiful to me."

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