

'Angels for autism'

New charity in Chesterfield is raising money to help local children get therapy – or maybe send them to summer camps or buy them special swings.

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Brad Buechler wasn't planning on starting a charity. But when a golf tournament that raised money for autism research was falling by the wayside last year, he and his family thought, "I guess we could do it."

The Buechler family also had another idea – instead of donating the money raised from the tournament to a national organization, they would use the money to help local families get therapy and services.

They began last June creating a nonprofit, Action for Autism. And after hosting their first golf tournament four months later, the opportunity to do even more quickly became apparent.

"If we can hold one event, we might as well hold four events, and if we can help one family, we might as well help another," said Brian Buechler, 28, of Chesterfield.

Action for Autism hosted a trivia night in February and a family walk and parade in June, raising nearly \$50,000 in addition to the \$70,000 raised from



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Andrea Felgenhauer plays with her children, Noah, 6, and Natalie, 2, at their home Thursday in Shrewsbury. Noah is autistic.

the golf tournament. Other organizations also have made donations.

The charity has already provided more than \$40,000 in financial assistance to 20 families, and about a dozen requests are

pending. Nearly 60 percent of assistance has gone toward therapy, while the rest has helped with everything from sending kids to summer camps, to purchasing

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GOLF TOURNAMENT

What • The second annual Action for Autism golf tournament.

When • 11 a.m. Monday. The event starts with lunch and ends with a 5 p.m. dinner and auction.

Where • Forest Hills Country Club, 36 Forest Club Drive, Chesterfield.

To register or learn more about AFA • Visit www.afastl.org, or call 636-449-0352.

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Families must fill out application, meet certain income guidelines

special swings, to blankets for help with sensory problems.

“The more we see these families, the more we realize there really is a need out there,” said Brad Buechler’s daughter, Sheila Charlton, 38, who is in charge of financial assistance.

Families must fill out an application and meet certain income guidelines. They also tell their story in personal interviews.

Most families break down in tears from the stress.

“They tell us, ‘If we can just get this therapy ... our doctor told us this would be beneficial, but we just don’t have enough money,’” Charlton said.

Early intervention is essential, and therapy is costly and time intensive. Insurance, however, doesn’t often cover the cost.

“We call them angels for autism,” said Andrea Felgenhauer, of Shrewsbury, who saw a big improvement in her 6-year-old son, Noah, after receiving assistance for occupational therapy and a six-week summer program. “They are filling in the gaps for so many people who need it.”

Autism impairs the ability to communicate and relate to others. It belongs to a group of neurobiological disorders known as autism spectrum disorders, which are on the rise. About 1 in 150 individuals is diagnosed with autism, making it more common than pediatric cancer, diabetes and AIDS combined.

The Buechler family also is driven to help for personal reasons. Brad Buechler’s second daughter, Lisa Messmer, 34, of Ellisville, has two autistic children — ages 14 and 9. Through her experience, they see a need for services, especially for older children.

The charity’s long-term goal is to open a school that serves children with autism or special needs through the 12th grade, said Brad Buechler, 60, of Town and Country.

Missouri lawmakers are working to pass legislation mandating that insurance companies cover the cost of autism therapy, and passage would allow the charity to focus more on creating the school. The charity envisions using donations and grants to help families who couldn’t afford tuition.

The organization is already in discussion with the Howard Park Center in Ellisville, which shares the same goal. The center provides classroom instruction for children with developmental delays and is one of only two schools in the country that teaches a class for autistic students using



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the Relationship Development Intervention method. It serves students up to age 11.

“The parents of those children are already worried about what’s next,” said executive director Dawn Casey. “If we can join forces with other organizations in our community, we can work faster and better” toward extending services.

Brad Buechler didn’t realize how quickly the charity would grow. It’s taken a path like that of his 24-year career with the plastics processing company Spartech — he served as CEO the last 14 years, as Spartech bought over 20 other companies and grew to over \$1 billion in sales. Buecher left in 2005 to create his own private investment company, Locherton Group.

Locherton Group’s small office in Chesterfield has become overrun with gift baskets, signs, cases of soda and Action for Autism brochures. The six part-time employees who run the charity share the Locherton office and are busy getting ready for the second annual golf tournament and dinner auction Monday. They hope to raise \$100,000.

It all blossomed, Buechler said, from a simple thought: “Let’s do more.”