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Autism is recognized worldwide as one of the most common and misunderstood developmental disabilities, and that's why some organizations at Radford University are doing all they can to encourage people to take a more compassionate look during Autism Awareness Month this April.

Autism Speaks is a nationwide program that funds research on the spectrum disorder, and for the first time, RU has its very own chapter. Made up of dedicated students and faculty from several academic disciplines, our Autism Speaks U chapter is working alongside the Disabilities Resource Office and the Student Occupational Therapy Association to orchestrate some big events this month.

Laura Mear, the faculty advisor to SOTA, described her hopes for the month: “Not just to accommodate, but to really recognize their strengths and how they can contribute back as well, is really encouraging to see.”

SOTA works with the Montgomery County School System to bring students with various disabilities to the RU campus and help them finish out high school level courses in an environment that is more suitable to their needs.

“They can have a job on campus; that’s very realistic to what life would be like outside of high school,” said Mear. “They’re actually helping us to plan the race.”

This Saturday, SOTA has organized their second annual 5K run in Bisset Park to raise money for autism awareness. Last year, approximately 200 people showed up to participate and the group raised around \$4000. This year the turnout looks to be even better, with fundraising already surpassing last year’s total and getting close to reaching the \$5000 goal.

Anyone who wishes to participate can register online for a discounted fee, via Radford’s Autism Speaks U website, or in person at the park. There will also be tents set up with various local businesses offering information on services they provide for families and people with autism. Some teams that are participating have helped the fundraiser gather thousands of dollars already.

However, RU’s dedication to recognizing autism is not limited only to April. Day in and day out, members of this university make great strides toward helping people with autism reach their own personal goals.

“Early intervention and working with them using strategies can help them be successful,” said Angela DeVore, the director of the DRO. She described how RU’s Autism Clinic and her office work together to provide unmatched benefits to students with autism and help them along their path to earning a college diploma.

On April 16, the DRO will have a table at the Bonnie to give everyone a chance to learn about autism and even simulate some of the symptoms. They will provide weighted vests to show the physical burdens people with autism must overcome, as well as stress balls and bracelets that students can take home as a permanent reminder of the cause.

New research has proven that the disability is more widespread than ever previously thought, with 1 in every 68 children having autism. Some students here who wish to pursue

autism advocacy, in its various professional forms as a career, have fantastic opportunities to work alongside the same people they could possibly have as clients after graduating.

“We offer a summer camp for kids who need to work on their speech skills,” explained Sarah Sharp, a graduate student who is very dedicated to the cause.

“They can come in with virtually no language and leave and be able to punch in exactly what they want to say,” she said. The camp makes use of tech devices like tablets and augmentative and alternative communication devices, as well as the proven use of sign language to help children with autism break the early barriers of communication.

“They call it eye-gaze (technology), just by staring at the system you can select letters or words on the screen,” said Sharp, of one of the most sophisticated tools RU employs in the program. Devices like these are often financially unavailable to families of children with autism, and the fact that RU provides them is a crucial benefit.

RU also offers life coaching services, for a fee, to students with autism. This expands on the role of the DRO and allows students who participate in the program to spend large parts of their day with students who have autism, helping them with everything from hygiene and eating to homework and shopping. Sometimes these tasks and living away from home are more of a hurdle for people with autism than complex academic challenges.

DeVore has also begun training the tutors who volunteer in the LARC on how to better accommodate people with autism who may come in for help.

To kick off Autism Awareness Month in a big way, the fountain on campus was dyed blue in coordination with the Autism Speaks U theme of Light it Up Blue this year. DeVore and many representatives of the RU community came out to the fountain on April 2, dressed in blue, and posed for a group photo to be posted on the website.

More information on how you can participate in Autism Awareness Month is available online from Autism Speaks U and at the Disability Resource Offices in Tyler Hall.