

# Families put best foot forward for March of Dimes

By TIM SMITH  
STAFF WRITER

Like too many people, Farmington Hills' Leonard and Lisa Cole and Livonia's David and Laurie Blacker used to consider the March of Dimes a work of charity to help sick or crippled children.

Not now. The Coles and Blackers are almost disciple-like in their support for the March of Dimes, particularly for its WalkAmerica, a 20-kilometer pledge walk scheduled for Saturday, April 27, and Sunday, April 28, throughout the United States. (Among 14 walk locations in southeast Michigan is one set for 9 a.m. April 28 in Farmington Hills, originating at the Oakland Community College Orchard Ridge campus on Orchard Lake Road.)

The two families gathered at the Blackers' Livonia home recently to talk about the positive impact the March of Dimes made in their lives, which was enough to make them and their children in 1995 join the WalkAmerica "Premie Star" team — one of many squads collecting pledges and walking the walk.

"I'm very grateful for their dedication to premature children and birth defects for children," said Lisa Cole, 35, whose daughter Lauren was born Sept. 10, 1993 at 25 weeks gestation, weighing only 1 pound, 10 ounces. "Leonard and I were just a husband and wife before. But because of the March of Dimes we're a family now. I couldn't imagine not being a family after having that gift."

It's a gift being made possible by \$10 and \$20 pledges, which help fund neonatal inten-

sive care units and spearhead progressive medical research. Not lost on the "Premie Star" team captain Laurie Blacker, 37, is the irony of it all.

"I used to think of March of Dimes as a very good cause," Blacker said. "I was helping all of those poor crippled kids using the walkers and crutches. But I had no idea they were so involved with NICUs."

She added how this year's WalkAmerica motto, "Walk For Someone You Love" is very appropriate. "That's where it really hits home. Because we have these kids right here that we're walking for. Definitely people we love."

Chiming in about how he used to consider March of Dimes was 39-year-old David Blacker. "We thought it'd be like the Salvation Army kettle you'd see outside Kmart. Drop in your quarter and be on your way."

"Because you really don't know where it (the money) goes," interjected Lisa Cole.

"Until it impacts you," added David Blacker.

## Totally dedicated — now

The families have a pretty good understanding these days. After all, they witnessed firsthand in recent years the trials and tribulations of hospital NICUs — efforts that probably saved the lives of Lisa Cole's daughter Lauren, both 2 and 3, and Katie Blacker, 5. Those NICUs exist because of the March of Dimes, which established them in 1970.

And it's no surprise that, in the 25 years since, improving that NICU care has been the main mission of the March of Dimes — which reportedly supplies more money toward the health of babies than any other independent non-profit agency in the country.

That is primarily why it's such a natural for families like the Coles and Blackers to dedi-

cate their lives to spreading the March of Dimes gospel.

Lauren Cole battled respiratory distress syndrome while in the NICU at William Beaumont Hospital in Royal Oak. While there, doctors administered surfactant, the artificial drug that speeds up lung development, developed in the early 1980s thanks to March of Dimes research.

"I think that (surfactant) was probably one of the only reasons she survived. She was so small that she didn't have the capacity to breathe on her own, or the strength to," said Cole, a mechanical engineer at Nissan Automotive Research and Development in Farmington Hills.

During the interview, Lauren revealed how much of a typical child she is now, asking for juice and a blanket and letting off some pretty impressive high-pitched belly laughs.

Also needing the surfactant was Katie Blacker, who needed the drug and a ventilator after being born about 12 weeks premature on Jan. 11, 1991 at Beaumont, but who today is all smiles and enthusiasm. The Blacker's son, Danny, was born Nov. 9, 1993 in the breach position (feet first) and later needed care for a brain bleed, common with premature babies. He rivals his sister in the smiles category.

Looking beyond her own children, Laurie Blacker noted that two premie nephews who died in the early 1980s, "would be here today if they had surfactant then."

"It's a life saver," she said with conviction.

## New money, new research

Those days, the research that March of Dimes intends to do with WalkAmerica money is geared toward prenatal care education, including promoting the use of folic acid to help prevent neural tube defects. Folic



TOM HAWLEY/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

**Ready for walkin':** Five-year-old Katie Blacker of Livonia (left), Lauren Cole, 2, of Farmington Hills and Katie's 2-year-old brother, Danny, rest up for the March of Dimes WalkAmerica, which has one of its walk routes in Farmington Hills.

acid is contained in orange juice and prenatal vitamins.

"You can get it by drinking extra orange juice," said Blacker, who oversees a Beaumont support group for parents of premature babies. "But people who are not getting adequate prenatal care are getting babies that are needing all this additional care after they're born."

She talked about the importance of educating people about folic acid and all other aspects of the March of Dimes, and about spreading the word via WalkAmerica — a charity event she took part in during the 1970s because she thought it was a "cool" thing to do.

"Never in my wildest dreams

did I ever think that (March of Dimes) would directly effect whether my child lived or died," she said. "It's not just a face on a poster. These are living, breathing children."

Concurring was David Blacker, in facilities management at University of Michigan-Deerborn. "March of Dimes... without it I wouldn't have healthy kids, if I had them at all."

Meanwhile, WalkAmerica will yield more than money, Laurie Blacker continued.

"It's going to raise awareness," she said. "Just like we had no clue that it was helping us, the people who have come through the unit since us, they don't know the March of Dimes had

anything to do with the NICUs."

And one never knows when they'll need help from something like the March of Dimes, said 33-year-old Leonard Cole, an electrical engineer at Dearborn-based Motorola.

"The people who are pledging to March of Dimes now may need that help someday," he said.

Cole's following sentence undoubtedly was drawn from personal experience. "You don't know you'll need that help until it happens to you. And it happens right away."

To sign up as a participant in the March of Dimes WalkAmerica, or for more information, call 1-810-423-3200.

# Superintendent hopeful sees great days ahead for district

Editor's note: The following is a profile of one of the three finalists for the position of superintendent of the Clarenceville School District, which includes the south-east corner of Farmington Hills.

By MARIE CHESTNEY  
STAFF WRITER

Of the three candidates for Clarenceville's top job, Thomas J. Tattan comes from the biggest district: the Plymouth-Canton Community Schools.

With its \$98 million budget, Plymouth-Canton is a powerhouse compared to Clarenceville's \$12 million budget.

Yet because of Proposal A and the new way the state funds districts statewide, Tattan sees great days ahead for smaller districts such as Clarenceville. They no longer will have to scratch for every penny and therefore will attract top teaching talent, he said.

"Clarenceville is in a position to become a shining star, if it wants to be," Tattan told the Clarenceville Board of Education during his interview for the job now held by David Kamich. Since 1992, Tattan has been executive director of instruction for all K-12 programs in Plymouth-Canton. He has spent 11 years in the district, starting in 1985 as a high

## CLARENCEVILLE

school principal and then becoming executive director of secondary education in 1990.

Tattan's teaching career began in 1972 in Ohio. He taught and coached in three Ohio districts before becoming an assistant principal in 1977 in Norwalk. He became a high school principal in 1979, also in Norwalk.

Tattan earned three degrees in education from Bowling Green State University and his doctorate in 1991 from Wayne State University.

His biggest asset, he says, is his ability to listen to what others say. That's how he would determine the strengths and needs of Clarenceville. "I'd talk to the people in the district and rely on the talented people you already have here."

One of his biggest successes in Plymouth-Canton, he says, is launching school improvement programs at each school. "We had to get people to focus on learning needs, not on getting a new Coke machine," Tattan said. "We helped schools improve themselves."

He's a risk-taker, and encourages risk-taking among teachers

and staff. As an example, he points to the ninth grade alternative education program that now takes place at a special site in the district. Eighth-grade dropouts were common, he said, because students were not making good decisions.

"Last year, if you had asked, 'Will this work?' I would have said, 'I don't know,'" Tattan said.

"We had to rely on a lot of things working out right. The majority of the staff said, try it. So we took the risk. It's OK to take a risk as long as you're trying to help kids."

The district is now exploring ways to expand the one-year program, he said.

Another idea, a small school-within-a-school for high schoolers, didn't fare so well. Parents loved the idea, he said, but students hated it. It was too much like middle school, they said.

Tattan teaches a parent-involvement class for graduate students at Wayne State University. In the class, he goes over the three main concerns all parents have: Is my child safe? Does someone in school know him and care about him? Is there a future for my child?

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The meeting, open to the public, begins at 8 p.m. at the Downtown Branch of the Farmington Community Library, Liberty and State streets.

Slovic will speak on "The Real Michigan Militia: The Detroit Lightguard." He will explain how the Detroit Lightguard played an important part in the Civil War, as well as in World War I and II as part of the 1st Michigan Infantry. For more information about Farmington Historical Society activities, call Ruth Moehman at 626-8264.

## Residents on board

The Farmington Hills City Council has made several appointments to the Com-

Families and the Beautification Commission.

Thomas Glossop, Annette Marie Hohl, Lisa-Ann LaPensee Smith, Gina Schafer, Alice Toroyan and Dr. Joseph William will serve on the Commission on Children, Youth and Families. Leine Wire-Corey will serve on the Beautification Commission.

## Junior Gardeners shine

Several members of the Junior Gardeners, co-sponsored by the Farmington Garden Club and the Downtown Branch of the Farmington Community Library, earned ribbons at two recent flower shows.

At the Silverdome Show, Julie Walters and Marisa Mathys won first-place ribbons. Vivian White, Hilary Michalak, Brandon Barajas and Amber Hall won second-

place honors. Earning third-place awards were Katie Lende and Stephanie White. Danielle Barajas gained an honorable mention.

At the University of Michigan Matthaei Gardens Show, first-place honors went to Marisa Mathys and Brandon Barajas; second-place ribbons were given to Katie Lende, Christie Halton and Jerusha Halton; third-place ones to Christine Carlson and Hilary Michalak; and honorable mentions to Julie Walters and Danielle Barajas.

Items for Farmington Focus may be mailed to the Farmington Observer, 33411 Grand River, Farmington 48336; faxed to 477-9722; or dropped off at the newspaper office. For the computer literate, the Internet E-mail address is: pachykeonline.com.