

She'll soon see her hero

Buddy Walk this year especially meaningful for this 6-year-old

By JEREMY C. RUARK

For the Headlight Herald

NEHALEM — For 6-year-old Mariah Almoguer-Rawlins, the world is a special place.

"When I take her into the store that has a screen where you can listen to music, Mariah loves to push all the music buttons. And she dances the whole time," said Mariah's mother, Maureen Rawlins. "Everything from ballet to rap, Mariah does it all."

But those standing nearby may find it difficult to understand Mariah. Especially when she speaks.

The Nehalem Elementary School student was born with Down syndrome and has difficulty communicating. "She can do just about anything any 6-year-old can do," said Rawlins, "but her number-one problem is speaking."

Rawlins said Mariah's troubles communicating often cause other youngsters to shy away. "When the kids are young, they want to be her friend and play with her. But when they get older, they realize she is different. They move away from her and they don't want to be with her."

Mariah lives with her mother and older brother in Nehalem. Rawlins has raised eight children, but she said trying to keep up with Mariah is the hardest thing she has ever done. "Mariah is challenging, because she is so stimulated that she is in action all day long and getting into things."

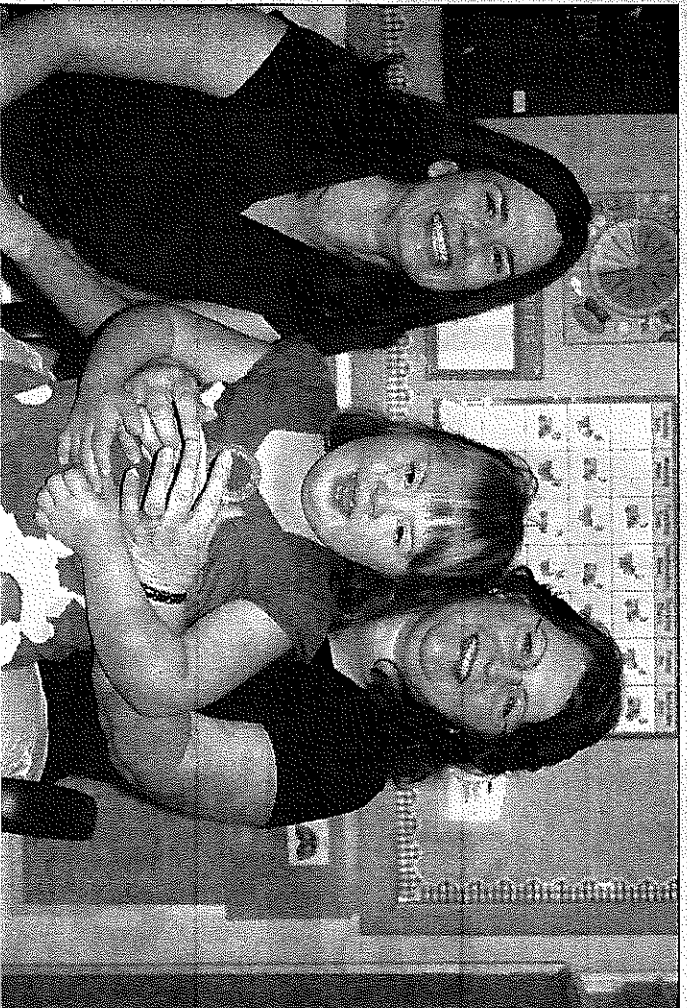


PHOTO BY LEEANN NEAL

Stacey Schuring, Mariah Rawlins and Maureen Rawlins (left to right) strike a happy pose in Mariah's Nehalem Elementary School classroom.

Rawlins described her daughter as thinking like a 3-year-old but attempting things a 6-year-old would do. That includes opening a door, leaving the house and walking down the street ... without telling anyone beforehand.

And, "If she watches me do something," said Rawlins, "she'll turn around and try to do it. At some point, that will be a very good thing. But right now, that can be dangerous."

At the same time, said Rawlins, parenting Mariah is a joyous responsibility. "She makes me laugh every day. There is never a dull moment in my house."

When pregnant with Mariah, Rawlins said, her doctors told her the child would not survive childbirth. "During the whole time, the doctors said, 'It's a no-go.' Well, Mariah is

here and she's made a big splash in life. She was meant to be here."

After Mariah was born, her mother searched for a way to communicate with the child. She came up with a sign language. "We started with a few things when she was just 12 months old, like 'stop' and 'no' and 'eat' and 'drink.'"

The lessons continued when the family moved from California to Nehalem.

Stacey Schuring, Mariah's special-education teacher at Nehalem Elementary School, introduced the family to "Signing Times," a DVD series that encourages communication for children of all

abilities by using American Sign Language.

"When she began signing and we understood what she was trying to say, it opened up a huge door. And Mariah realized that," said Rawlins.

Now, when Mariah speaks, she also uses sign language, often becoming very animated. Rawlins said that helps others understand her. "I say the words back to her, to reinforce what she is saying."

Mariah soon will have the opportunity to meet one of her heroes, the creator and star of "Signing Times," Rachel Coleman. Coleman is scheduled to perform a sign language concert during the fifth-annual

If You Go

The Fifth-Annual Buddy Walk
10 a.m. on Sept. 26
Seaside's Quatat Park,
Between Broadway and
1st Avenue

"Signing Concert"
1 p.m. on Sept. 26
Seaside Convention Center

North Coast Down Syndrome Network Buddy Walk at 1 p.m. Sept. 26 at the Seaside Convention Center.

The walk will begin at 10 a.m. at Quatat Park in downtown Seaside. It's the annual fundraiser for the North Coast Down Syndrome Network, the only non-profit organization dedicated to serving the Down syndrome population and their families along the north Oregon coast and southwest Washington.

The proceeds go to creating welcome baskets for new babies born with Down syndrome, to increasing awareness and to educating those in need.

As for parents who have children with Down syndrome, Rawlins advises,

"Love them. Stimulate them both physically and emotionally."

"Don't be afraid to treat them like any child. That's the most important thing you can do."