

March of Dimes broadening outlook

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The March of Dimes is doing some retooling in 2008, renaming its longtime Walk America a "March for Babies."

"We stand for all babies," Stephen P. McDonald, director of program services for the March of Dimes Utah chapter, said at the third-annual Birth Defects Conference, held Saturday afternoon at the Eccles Health Education Building on the University of Utah campus.

More than 70 people sought education and support at the five-hour event, titled "A Lifelong Journey for Children and Families."

McDonald said that despite the retooling, the March of Dimes' mission remains the same — improving the health of babies by preventing birth defects, premature births and infant mortality.

Marcia Feldkamp, director of the Utah Birth Defects Network, said birth defects are the leading cause of infant mortality. In Utah, that equals 1,350 babies annually, or four a day, born with birth defects.

She started the Utah Birth Defects Network in 1994.

Looking for risk factors may be the key to help prevent birth defects, she believes.

Ryan Bott, parent of a child with a birth defect, said there are a lot of issues parents of such children deal with, and he's a proponent of support groups to talk about them. "We kind of got tossed into the fire and had to do it on our own," he said of his and his wife's experiences with a child that had a cleft lip. He'd like "an easier path for other parents."

Rachel Coleman, well known for her "Signing Time" TV program, focused on her experiences as a mother of two children with birth defects. One child, Leah, is deaf and another, Lucy, has spina bifida.

"Don't let your circumstances have you," she advised parents of children with birth defects. She's grateful for living a life with daily adventures stemming from her special children. "We get to live a miraculous life."

She and her husband, Aaron, are headed to Africa Monday to help teach children there sign language.

Coleman said signing is a common language that has worked for her family.

She likes to make signing fun and interactive with the audience in her presentations. For more details on the "Signing Time" program, go to www.signingtime.com.

• The annual Salt Lake area March of Dimes walk will be April 26 at Wheeler Farm. More information on the March of Dimes is available at: www.marchofdimes.com.

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