

World Autism Awareness Concert Livens Up Emancipation Park

In celebration of World Autism Awareness Month, the Jamaica Autism Support Association (JASA), with the assistance of the Digicel Foundation, hosted a free concert at Emancipation Park in New Kingston.

"Our purpose is to spread and share information about autism to parents and the general public and to raise awareness about autism with the intention of making changes for our children and the families living with autism," said Kathy Chang, co-founder of JASA. Entertaining the crowd with lively performances were bands from special needs schools, Genesis Academy and Promise Learning Centre, both located in Kingston. Gospel artiste Jermaine Edwards also gave a soulful and moving performance. "For the past five years, the Jamaica Autism Support Association has put on a public display of recognising and acknowledging autism," said Chang. "This year is our first Autism Awareness Concert showcasing the talent of individuals affected by the disorder." As part of the formalities, Professor Maureen Samms-Vaughan, patron of JASA, gave a brief lecture on autism in an effort to increase awareness about the developmental challenge. In 2008, the United Nations officially declared April 2 World Autism Awareness Day (WAAD) and the month of April is now recognised internationally as World Autism Awareness Month. In recognition of this, several organisations have made attempts to light their buildings and homes with blue bulbs, symbolic of autism awareness. This included one of Digicel's dealers' electronic messaging boards in New Kingston. Digicel Foundation volunteers were on hand at the Autism Awareness Concert to hand out blue key rings with flashlights as well as bubble-blowing kits to both children and adults. The kits were provided by Dekal Wireless Jamaica Ltd. "We always treasure these very precious opportunities to partner with organisations like JASA with the hope of increasing awareness on autism," noted Samantha Chantrelle, executive director of the Digicel Foundation. "The Foundation is committed to supporting the special needs community as a whole. We want to be a part of activities that support families of children living with autism. This concert was a great way of providing good, wholesome entertainment for everyone while still educating the general public about autism." Lifelong disability Autism is a lifelong disability and is the world's fastest growing developmental disorder. Signs of autism generally appear before 24 months of age. It is a spectrum disorder with varying degrees of severity. However, the disability tends to affect boys almost five times more than girls. These children show delays or regression in speech, social skills and physical abilities. It is expected that approximately 450 children will be born with varying degrees of this condition in Jamaica each year. Early interventions, such as speech, occupational and behavioural modification and physical therapies, give children a chance at normal lives. In addition to the concert, both JASA and the Digicel Foundation recently hosted some 100 children and their families at Cable Hut Beach for the organisation's third annual Surfing for Autism event. Participants were able to surf and interact with surfers from the Jamaica Surfing Association. Children were also given the option of playing in wading pools and on bounce-a-bouts or enjoying a number of other activities on the beach. The Digicel Foundation also supported the 2012 and 2013 Light it up Blue Campaign to commemorate World Autism Awareness Day and Month. In addition, JASA was one of eight beneficiaries of the Digicel Foundation's 2012 5k Night Run/Walk.