

Fishing event heartens underprivileged kids

Effort strives to help physically and mentally challenged children

BY ANDREA E. GARCIA
DAILY REPUBLIC

FAIRFIELD — Although Christopher Stratton, an 8-year-old boy with cerebral palsy, can barely speak, he managed to express his excitement earlier this week when his mother told him of a fishing trip the family would be taking today.

It will be his first.

"I think this is one of those things where once he does it, he'll want to do it again," Sue-Finn Stratton of Vacaville said of her son, who uses a walker. "He doesn't have the strength to hold his grip for long periods, he will fatigue, but we'll help him."

He's not alone in the excitement. Stratton is one of 100 children who will participate in the "Kids Day of Fishing" at Lake Solano Park, an event specifically geared for children ages 7-13 who are underprivileged or physically and mentally challenged.

On this no-license-required fishing day, one of two in the year, each of the 100 children attending will receive free hats, shirts, rods and reels, tackle kits/tackle boxes and bait to fish

in the handicapped accessible pond at Lake Solano.

They will have access to fish in a pond stocked with more than \$2,300 worth of catfish and bass, made possible through donations from local businesses and support from the Kiwanis Club of Suisun City. For many of them, this will be their first time fishing. The California Department of Fish and Game has also stocked more than 1,000 pounds of trout in Lake Solano, which will be open to the public today.

The genesis for the event came from Mike Johns, also known as Captain Mike to those familiar with his fervor for fishing, who believes in children and wants to see them succeed.

"People in the community ignore the youth. They see them wearing low-riders and just want to forget about them," said Johns, who owns Mail Mart on Travis Boulevard. "But I think we should start concentrating on the problem. We can make a change, a difference and, together with the community, we can do it."

Johns said the idea to help children with needs and those with disabilities stemmed from years ago. But it was last year

At a glance

What: "Kids Day of Fishing"
When: 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. today
Where: Lake Solano Park, 8685 Pleasants Valley Road, Winters
Info: 425-9792
Free event

that his father, Larry Johns, nudged his son to pursue the idea.

"He told me to research the cost and see what it would take to get things done," Johns said of his father, whom he describes as a go-getter.

"As I was talking to a retired guy at Long's Drugs about the idea of a fishing trip for children, a woman followed me out and gave me a \$20 bill. She said she wanted to be a part of it. That's when my pops said to start it."

Johns has a special place in his heart for children with disabilities, he admitted, because he has a brother with cerebral palsy. His family, he said, overcame the challenges and misunderstandings of others, which fostered his desire to help other children in similar situations.

His father, a retired Air Force chief master sergeant,

also pursued a mission to help the underprivileged and disabled by joining Kiwanis and contributing his efforts in community events geared toward the young. His laborious efforts eventually earned him a promotion to lieutenant governor of Kiwanis District 8.

Last November, however, 72-year-old Larry Johns was diagnosed with colon cancer, forcing him to slow his pace.

"I don't know if my life has changed much, but chemotherapy tends to slow you down a bit," Larry Johns said.

"You don't have the energy to travel as much, but I'm getting back to where I'm mobilized. You just keep going day to day."

Mike Johns hopes to make this more than an annual event because he believes the outdoors are a way for children to connect with the world.

"You have to introduce them to things and push them forward," he said. "I'd like to get a foundation going and have the community build it one brick at a time. I made this a pretty good goal and I will continue. I'm stepping in this for the rest of my life."

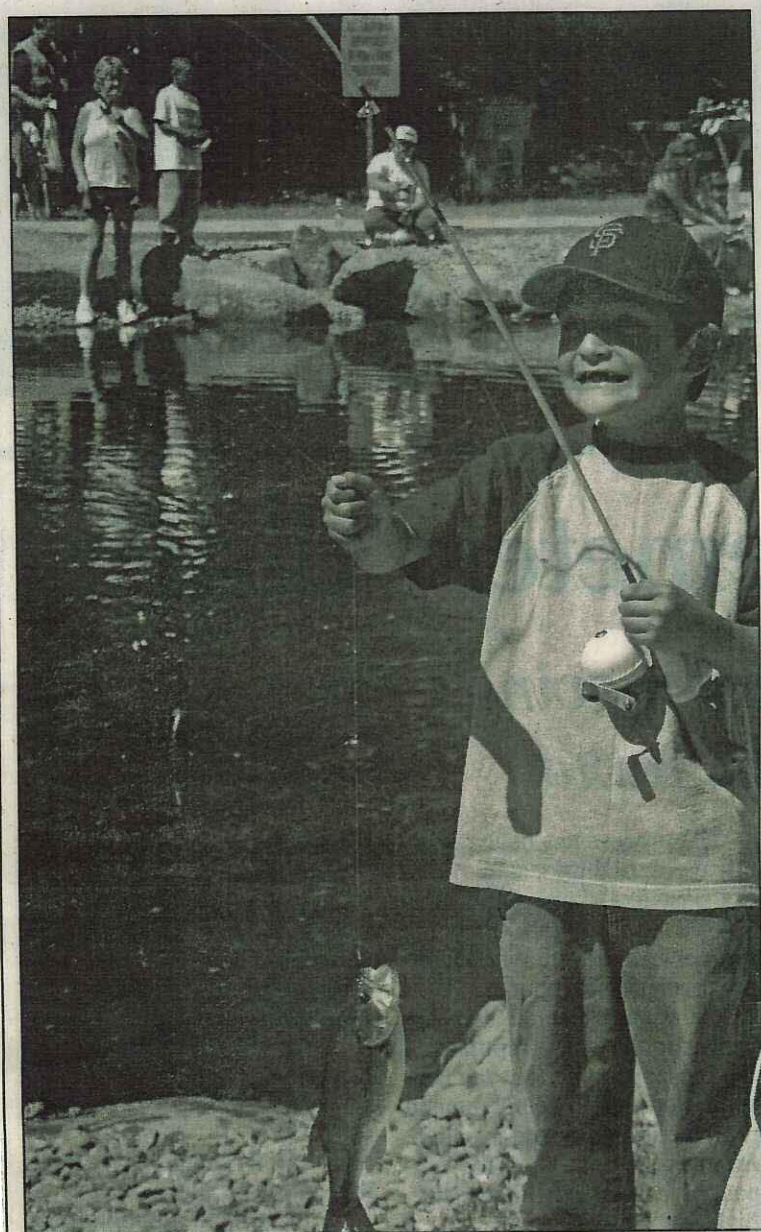
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Courtesy photo

Mike Johns, Owner of Mail Mart Plus and founder of Kids Day fishing is shown with Kaylianne Johnson, who won the grand prize of a two-night, all-expense paid guided fishing trip to Eagle Lake.

Solano children enjoy day of fishing



Lynn Larsen/Daily Republic

Look what I got

Diego Maldonado, 6, smiles with excitement after catching his first fish of the day at the first Annual Kids Day of Fishing at Lake Solano Park on Saturday. The Kiwanis Club of Suisun City hosted the event specifically geared for children ages 7-13 who are underprivileged or physically and mentally challenged.