

# LIVING Executive

CENTRAL FLORIDA'S LIFESTYLE MAGAZINE

giving back



More than 1,000 participants took part in the June 6, 2005, Make 'm Smile Buddy Stroll at Lake Eola, above and below.



Marie and Tim Kuck

## Tim Kuck — Nathaniel's Hope

By Alma Kadragic

Although Nathaniel Timothy Kuck's life was tragically cut short as a result of being born prematurely with multiple disabilities, his brief life has resulted in the creation of a program that celebrates the lives of special needs children throughout Central Florida.

His father, Tim Kuck, vice president of Regal Marine Industries Inc., says that although Nathaniel never talked or walked in his 4 years and five months of life, he was able to smile a "great smile," and that memory underpins the mission undertaken by him and his wife, Marie, to give meaning to Nathaniel's life.

Tim Kuck recalls that after one of Nathaniel's surgeries, a nurse began to cry and then pray. She prayed, he says, not for the child's recovery, but "that my son's purpose would be fulfilled." One-and-a-half years later when, after more procedures and nonstop 24/7 care at home, Nathaniel's brief life came to an end, Tim and Marie Kuck remembered the nurse's words.

"Both my wife and I had this incredible conviction that this isn't over, that this is the beginning," Tim Kuck explains.



Photos by Tanya Landine

Just a few weeks after their son's death, the Kucks decided that Nathaniel's purpose was to encourage and support other families with special needs children, VIPs as they call them. That led to the establishment of Nathaniel's Hope, an organization dedicated to sharing hope with children with special needs and their families. The inaugural event was the Make 'm Smile Buddy Stroll at Lake Eola, held on Nathaniel's birthday, June 6, in 2003. The aim, Tim Kuck says, is "to honor and celebrate the lives of VIP kids."

The concept is simple: Families and individuals are invited to "be a buddy" and walk around Lake Eola with VIP children and families. The first year, Tim Kuck estimates, some 600-700 people showed up. In 2004, numbers more than doubled to 1,500-1,700, and Orange County Mayor Richard Crotty and his wife, Pam, along with Orlando Mayor Buddy Dyer and his wife, Karen, became the honorary co-chairs of the event and participated in the Buddy Stroll.

On June 6, 2005, braving bad weather, a large crowd turned out again to Make 'm Smile, anchored by the Kucks, the Crottys and the Dyers. The highlight was the Buddy Stroll around the lake. Clowns, face painting and theme park characters helped entertain the children. The Goads presented a child- and family-friendly concert. More than 50 vendors that service the special needs community exhibited at the site. Corporate sponsors provided food, beverages and goodies for the children.

Looking back, Tim Kuck says, "We successfully helped build a bridge between two communities that don't always come together, those with and those without disabilities, and we honored the



Orange County Mayor Rich Crotty (left) and Orlando Mayor Buddy Dyer talk with one of the Buddy Stroll's special needs kids.

VIP families." Looking forward, he wants to provide a respite from ongoing responsibilities as caregivers for VIP families.

As a result, Nathaniel's Hope has developed Buddy Breaks that gather VIP families for three hours every Saturday morning in partnership with local churches. So far, Calvary Assembly in Winter Park and First Baptist Sweetwater in Longwood offer Buddy Breaks. Eventually, Tim and Marie Kuck hope to build a respite center in Central Florida to provide longer and more convenient respite services, and they hope to establish what Tim Kuck calls "a broader funding base."