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Mental Health Symposium at UVU focuses on autism

By **Elizabeth Edwards** - Sun, 04/10/2011 - 23:10

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Photo courtesy of Nate Long The Mental Health Symposium on autism is being held today at UVU until 5 p.m.

A Mental Health Symposium on autism will be held today at Utah Valley University. The conference includes forums, lunch, sessions on different aspects of autism and a keynote speech by JaLynn Prince.

Toni Harris, assistant dean of administration in the College of Humanities and Social Sciences at UVU, said autism was a small focus of last year's UVU Mental Health Symposium, and because of the overwhelming feedback they received the topic, they chose to make autism the theme for this year's conference. Harris said more than 400 people have pre-registered.

"There has not been a conference like this in some time, and when we announced we were going to focus on autism many people let out a huge sigh of joy that we were doing something like this and at an educational facility," Harris said.

Laurie Bowen, director of the Autism Bridges program through Kids on the Move, said UVU student volunteers will care for autistic children of parents who would like to attend the conference. Bowen said many parents are excited about the low-cost yet informative conference.

The event begins at 9 a.m. and goes until 5 p.m. It is open to the public, and anyone interested in autism will benefit from the conference, Harris said.

"We wanted to offer information that would be useful for parents, professors, educators or anyone interested," Harris said. "We wanted to talk about a variety of aspects of the topic."

Daniel Fairbanks, associate dean of the College of Health and Science at UVU, said the conference will be useful for everyone because many people are affected by autism.

"Autism is so prevalent, it is hard to imagine anyone who is not affected in some way by autism, either through a relative, a friend, a child or themselves," Fairbanks said. "It's any issue that touches nearly everybody in some way, so it is critical for people to learn what autism is, and where things are going scientifically, educationally and socially with it."

In the afternoon, concurring sessions will discuss topics such as what to do after a diagnosis of autism, how to treat adult-aged autistic children and the how autism affects family dynamics.

Fairbanks will speak on the genetics of autism and create a sculpture of his autistic son at the same time. Fairbanks said he has done other sculpting lectures, but he usually sculpts famous people. When he thought about how autistic people are not typically recognized, he decided to sculpt his autistic son during the lecture.

"This is a way of honoring people with autism while speaking about the important topics that people need to know about," Fairbanks said.

The keynote speaker, Prince, will speak at noon about changes in the scope of autism in the past 20 years and how it will evolve in the future.

The conference costs \$19 to attend, and the fee includes lunch, parking and other materials. For more information, visit uvu.edu/chss/autism.

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