

**EDUCATION**



Tribune photos / Lauren Formosa

A group of Spring Lake Intermediate School students walk with their classmate, fifth-grader Benjamin Bator, center, during their school's first KATwalk in support of the KAT6 Foundation on Monday afternoon. Benjamin has a KAT6 syndrome, a rare genetic disorder which only 500 globally have been diagnosed with.

# 'Even a simple act can create change'

Spring Lake Intermediate, Middle School hosts first ever KATwalk in support of fifth-grade student

By **LAUREN FORMOSA**  
Grand Haven Tribune

Students at Spring Lake Intermediate and Middle School recently came together in support of a good cause and one of their own classmates.

On Monday, the intermediate and middle school held its first-ever KATwalk – an event which raises funds and aware-



Spring Lake Intermediate School students walk around the track together on Monday afternoon for the school's first ever KATwalk.

ness for the KAT6 Foundation. The nonprofit organization was created to support individuals with KAT6A and

KAT6B syndromes and their families internationally; work to advance research aimed at developing treatments for the rare genetic disorders; and raise awareness for KAT6 syndromes so they can be more easily identified, treated, and studied.

While raising funds for an important cause, the intermediate and middle school's first KATwalk also served a more meaningful purpose for the combined school community: showing support for one of their own.

Benjamin Bator, now a fifth-grader in the

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## KATWALK

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intermediate school's SXI program, was diagnosed with KAT6A syndrome at age 3. His mother, Katie, said she and her family have been working with the KAT6 Foundation since receiving the rare diagnosis. The Bators have organized five KATwalks in total to support the KAT6 Foundation's work through Team Benjamin, joining other families around the world hosting these events throughout the month of September to fundraise for the foundation.

Katie, who also teaches sixth grade at the intermediate school, explained that she decided to partner with the combined school's Unified Club and hold a mini fundraising event to correlate with the building's final week of Inclusion Month.

"Being a Unified Champion School runs on three pillars, and that's youth leadership, whole school engagement and unified sports," said Ashley Reynolds, special education teacher and a member of the school's Unified Team. "We figured (this was) a perfect way to wrap up our last week of Inclusion Month. All month, the students have been ... doing different activities and lessons based on inclusion. This is (our) spirit week, so we designated today to be blue and orange day (for the KAT6 Foundation) and to have a whole school engagement to celebrate Ben."

"(Benjamin) has grown up with these kids since kindergarten," Katie added. "Most of them are pretty aware of KAT6 - i go into his classroom and speak every year, so they know about KAT6 and they know about Ben. Our Unified Club just ran with it and said that they would love to help put this on for us."

Throughout the day, the fifth- through eighth-grade students headed out to the track inside Grabinski Field to walk in support of the KAT6



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**A Spring Lake Intermediate School student helps one of his classmates put on a KAT6 Foundation temporary tattoo while outside at the school's first ever KATwalk on Monday.**



**Fifth-grade student Benjamin Bator walks alongside Spring Lake Middle School students during the intermediate and middle school's KATwalk on Monday.**

Foundation. They also did activities inside the classroom to learn more about KAT6 syndromes, such as the rarity of the genetic disorder and the ways it presents in different individuals.

There are approximately 500 individuals globally who are diagnosed with KAT6 syndromes and registered on the foundation's KAT6A/KAT6B Patient Registry in collaboration with the National Organization of Rare Diseases (NORD). Symptoms can vary widely amongst those diagnosed with the genetic disorder impacting the KAT6 gene, with some the most common being global developmental delay, significant speech and language deficits, intellectual disabilities, vision issues, abnormal muscle tone and heart defects.

Outside, the intermediate and middle school students were excited to walk or even run the track to support the KAT6 Foundation and celebrate their fellow classmate.

"So many students have grown up with Ben either being at Holmes or if ... they maybe had Mrs. Bator as a teacher," Reynolds said. "I feel like it's very rare for a student to not know Ben. So, the fact that they got to come out here and celebrate not only Ben but a teacher they love so much, Mrs. Bator, they were pumped."

Along with wearing blue and orange clothes, students could be found around the track with "Inclusion" stickers, KAT6 Foundation bracelets and temporary tattoos, and even saying written on their arms such as "KAT6 Warriors." Some

walked in small groups, while others joined the large group walking with Benjamin and other students in the school's special education programs.

"(There's) so much energy," Katie said. "Even the seventh and eighth-graders, they all know Benji, too. Their energy was high this morning ... they really enjoyed it. At this building (fifth and sixth grade), they're super hyped up about it."

"It's amazing to see all the blue and orange," added Megan Stetts, the KAT6 Foundation's social media coordinator. "Especially the kiddos that have KATwalk t-shirts from previous walks, so you know this isn't their first time. You know that they're aware of KAT6 and Benjamin, and how such a rare disease can affect someone so close to home. It's great to see them all turn out and show their support."

On their way into Spring Lake's football stadium, students were also asked to donate \$1 dollar to the KAT6 Foundation. In total, Katie said the intermediate and middle school raised over \$630 for the organization through Team Benjamin. This money, she said, would go directly towards supporting the KAT6 Foundation's ongoing research, provide Empowered Grants to families in need specialized equipment or therapies, and to help the put on their annual conference.

Seeing the immense support form the student body for Team Benjamin, as well as the ways they continue to be inclusive and accepting of all people living with disabilities, was incredibly meaningful for the Bator family.

"It means the world to us that Benjamin is fully immersed in being a Spring Lake Laker in every way," Katie said. "He may not play a certain sport or he may not be in a certain club, but he has his own network of kids who support him and encourage him. I think he inspires them just as much as they inspire us every day."

"These guys do a really

great job at inclusivity in our school," she continued. "They've grown up with the same classmates like Benjamin, having KAT6, but also (students in) the cognitively impaired program, intensive resources room, SXI, and special education, and they just lean that no matter what ... difference you have, everybody has a heart and everybody can learn from each other."

Through their first school-wide KATwalk, Katie and her fellow event organizers hope the students can help spread more awareness for KAT6 syndromes throughout their community.

"We got 800 kids approximately that walked today, and they know why they're walking and who they're walking for," Katie said. "So, hopefully, that message just continued to spread. This is one of thousands of rare diseases in the world We're learning about people with differences and disabilities and the more people know, the more resources (can be found) out there too."

They also hope the students understand the importance of learning rare diseases such as KAT6 syndromes and supporting people in their communities impacted by them.

"Especially in such a rare disease like KAT6, it can feel very isolating and very lonely," Stetts said. "When you have a community that can wrap their arms around you and show support like this, I think that goes a long way in boosting spirits and ... feeling like we're not alone."

"To show up for those in your community, it can be as simple as donating \$1 and walking a lap," she continued. "It helps raise incredible awareness and funds that support a community that is ... rare and small, but we're mighty. When people show up and show support, I think it's important for them to take away that even a simple act like a mini KATwalk can create change."

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