

# Ability First's 32nd Gourmet Festival of Fall



AbilityFirst celebrated its 32nd annual Gourmet Festival of Fall at the historic South Pasadena estate of John and Renee Davis last Sunday. — Photo by Terry Miller

BY DANIEL MATLOCK

The aroma of food and fine wine filled the air at the historic South Pasadena estate of John and Renee Davis last Sunday as AbilityFirst celebrated its 32nd annual Gourmet Festival of Fall. Not even

overcast skies and lingering raindrops could dampen the festivities. Over five hundred people attended the event, nearly doubling last year's turnout.

The festival was a fundraiser for one of Southern California's larg-

est and oldest nonprofit social service organizations. First established as the Crippled Children's Society in 1926, AbilityFirst provides a wide variety of vocational and recreational programs throughout the San Gabriel Valley for

children and adults with autism, Down syndrome, and other neurological and physical disabilities.

In support of AbilityFirst's cause, local restaurants and wineries gathered to provide samples of their products. Guests were able to taste delicious fare ranging from Green Street Restaurant's famous Dianne Salad to El Cholo Cafe's Green Corn Tamales in Mole Sauce. The expansive front lawn of the Davis estate was the venue not only for the food and wine tasting but also for a silent auction which included passes to Disneyland, gift certificates to local restaurants, travel giveaways, and gift baskets. The live music of Taxi Wisdom and No Boundaries added extra vibrancy.

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Speakers at the event emphasized the AbilityFirst mission statement: "Looking beyond disabilities, focusing on capabilities, expanding possibilities." Not content with merely providing social services for disabled children and adults, the organization works to extend the potential of disabled people. As Event Chair Julie Smith explains, "We want to mainstream our kids into life." Her speech noted AbilityFirst's recreational programs where children and adults participate in activities that once seemed out of reach - rock climbing, skiing, surfing, and even white water rafting.

Fundraising coordinator Mary Beth Perrine highlighted the generosity of contributors. "We're

so grateful for the donors, friends, neighbors, and families at AbilityFirst. We can't do what we do without them." Her statements were echoed in the congenial, close-knit atmosphere of the evening.

Representatives from the offices of State Assembly member Carol Liu also spoke at the event, emphasizing the need for both state and private support. As encouragement, they presented the organizers of the Festival of Fall with a certificate of recognition on behalf of the California State Assembly.

A number of celebrity guests including West Wing alumnus Bradley Whitford and actress Lee Meriwether added voice to the cause. Whitford, whose wife, actress Jane

Kaczmarek, has been involved with the organiza-

tion for several years, said he attended because the "organization is part of our neighborhood and is one that really resonates with our feelings."

Meriwether served as Honorary Chair for the event. Her involvement with the organization stems from long-term desire to contribute. As a teenager, Meriwether worked one on one with patients at the Crippled Children's Hospital in San Francisco and, since then, has always been interested in charitable work. She lauds AbilityFirst's program because "you can earmark exactly where your donation will go." All of Meriwether's contributions go directly to children's recreational camping facilities.

Last year's Gourmet Fall Festival garnered over \$190,000. This year's total which will go to two AbilityFirst Centers, the Lawrence L. Frank Center (which provides services for children) and the Pasadena Work Center (which provides vocational services for adults), is expected to exceed that amount.

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