

Paddling for Cancer Patient

More than 100 Kids Expected to Brave Nine Miles of Ocean

Around 100 kids will paddle this weekend to raise funds in support of Ashley Vasquez, a six-year-old fighting leukemia, and the Cancer Center of Santa Barbara's "I Count Too" program. The nine-mile paddle on Sunday from Campus Point to Leadbetter Beach is the fourth of its kind organized by the Keiki Paddle — a nonprofit organization that is "for the kids, by the kids, of the kids," explained Tom Kronen, a member of Friendship Paddle's board of directors.

"Planning the Keiki Paddle is pretty fun, and it's a lot of hard work," said Tavis Boise, Dos Pueblos High senior and Keiki Paddle president. It took about three months to plan, requiring the kids to meet every few weeks, Kronen said. The Keiki Paddle advisory board is composed of kids aged 13 to 17 years old, but the organization encourages kids from 7 to 17 years old to participate.

Ashley Vasquez-Castro

"There's a lot to putting this paddle on — it's a nine-mile ocean paddle and lots can go wrong," Boise said. "We have to make sure everyone is safe. We have to make sure every paddler has a support boat — a bunch of us are 'sweepers' who paddle the whole way back and forth helping the youngest along. This isn't an event where you can just walk in and paddle, but on the other hand we want to raise more money and help out more kids."



According to Kronen, the organization has high-reaching impact, garnering donations from individuals in other states and in Europe — however, it generates most of its fundraising from local individuals that are connected to the participant paddlers or beneficiary. The organization works with donations from businesses — such as Trader Joes, Santa Barbara Chicken Ranch, and Surf 'N' Wear Beach House, among others — and participant registration fees to insure the beneficiary and their family receives all of the donated funds, Kronen said.

The Keiki Paddle typically benefits an individual and a local non-profit organization. Individuals are selected through "word-of-mouth referral," Kronen said, and non-profit organizations are selected based on a specific interest of children affected with life-threatening illnesses. The Friendship Paddle board of directors and the Keiki Paddle junior advisory board discuss candidates and weigh the financial need of each family when deciding the year's beneficiary, Kronen explained.

"The hardest part, and the best part, is picking the beneficiary," Boise said. "Usually we have a few kids with really serious problems who we want to help. Last year we decided unanimously to help two kids — they were both just so compelling. We really study up on these children, and then we decide, together, who we're going to paddle for."

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The Keiki Paddle is an extension of and mirrored after the Friendship Paddle, which was formed in 2002 in response to a friend who was diagnosed with an inoperable brain tumor, said John Mosby, a Friendship Paddle advisory board member. The Friendship Paddle developed in support of the friend and his family.

“It really is about a community of strangers coming together for someone they may not know who is going through a difficult time,” Mosby said.

Many of the children on the Keiki Paddle advisory board had parents who were beneficiaries of the Friendship Paddle, and who have since passed away, and some are children of Friendship Paddle board members, Kronen said. “We wanted the kids to have a direct influence on decisions and the whole event,” Kronen said. “We recognize it's a great learning opportunity for them to become involved in a non-profit and get exposed to planning an event, coordinating people, and managing cost.”

For Tavis Boise, working with Keiki Paddle has given him new perspective. “Taking part in the Keiki Paddle has been life-changing and just great overall,” Boise said. “I really appreciate my life and everything I have a whole lot more. The work we do in the Keiki Paddle is to help better the lives of those who find themselves in unwanted and unfair situations.”

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For more information, see keikipaddle.org/.