

## Stutterers convention helps kids learn they're not alone

By Robert McCoppin | Daily Herald Staff

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What: 2010 Friends Convention for The National Association of Young People Who Stutter

Who: People who stutter ages 6 to 22, their families, friends and therapists

Where: Embassy Suites Chicago, O'Hare/Rosemont, 5500 N. River Road, Rosemont

When: Through Sunday

Cost: \$235 for an adult and child, or \$125 for one day

Information: [friendswhostutter.org](http://friendswhostutter.org), (866) 866-8335

convention.

"I didn't want to go," she recalled. "My mom dragged me. But I met some great people, and I ended up loving it."

Ostergaard, now 24, was in denial at the time, not wanting to talk about her stuttering, and not wanting to deal with it.

The best thing she got out of the convention, she said, was "meeting other kids going through the same thing, to stutter and be OK with it."

When Ben Staub was about 6 years old, his mother told him his dad was going to take him to a Friends Convention for kids who stutter.

Ben started to cry and said, "He can't, mommy." He got close to his mother and whispered, "But then he'll know."

Ben thought he was hiding his stuttering from everyone but his mother.

"All that time, he thought it was his dirty little secret," his mother, Cathy Staub, remembered. "I didn't know how ashamed it made him feel."

Ben didn't know any other children who stuttered. When he went to the convention, he walked into a room full of kids talking and stuttering.

"Suddenly, he wasn't alone," Staub said. "The power of that moment was so huge."

By the time the convention was over, Ben had bought a T-shirt that read, "If you stutter, you have Friends," and wore it to his first day of school in Naperville. He was ready to share his secret.

This weekend, several hundred children and their families are attending the annual Friends Convention for The National Association of Young People Who Stutter, held this year in Rosemont.

The convention brings together kids, parents and therapists for an emotional exchange in which people share, often for the first time, their humiliations and triumphs in dealing with the condition.

Like Ben, Val Ostergaard of Cary never knew anyone else who had her problem, until she went to the

Now, the kids she met at the convention are her best friends.

After her first convention, Ostergaard began speech therapy that has helped her nearly eliminate her stuttering. She went on to earn a bachelor's degree in speech therapy and is seeking her master's at Illinois State University to help people with some of the same issues.

At the convention, she will run a workshop for teens to discuss high school, dating, college - all those normal dramas that can be further complicated by stuttering.

The keynote speaker is Alan Rabinowitz, a person who stutters who is also an author, explorer and conservationist who established a tiger reserve in Myanmar.

One of the local experts speaking at the convention will be Kristin Chmela, a speech pathologist in Long Grove who specializes in stuttering. In some cases, she's treated kids who've had rocks thrown at them or gotten into fights with other children because of their stuttering.

Chmela emphasizes not only techniques for speaking fluently, but also works on self-perception and confidence. The trend is not necessarily to achieve perfect fluency, but to communicate effectively.

Toward that end, Chmela will also help lead, with local recreational groups, Camp Speak Up for kids who stutter, age 7 to 14, in Ingleside Aug. 11-15. (For information, call (847) 816-4866.)

Among roughly 3 million Americans who stutter, males outnumber females four to one. So as the stuttering comic Jody Fuller points out for males attending the convention, "You better bring your A game."

Yes, there is a comic who stutters, just as there is a well-known golfer (Tiger Woods), actor (James Earl Jones, the voice of Darth Vader), and television reporter (John Stossel), among many celebrities who stutter.

Stuttering sometimes clusters in families, and earlier this year, researchers found the first gene mutation linked to some cases of stuttering.

The discovery doesn't help with treatment so far, but it could lead to early identification and intervention or enzyme therapy down the road. And it should help keep people from feeling ashamed.

Ben Staub is now 14, plays French horn in the marching band at Neuqua Valley High School in Naperville, and like stutterer Carly Simon, sings without stuttering.

His open recognition of stuttering made it easier to deal with, and therapy has improved his speaking.

He's looking forward to seeing friends at the convention he only gets to see once a year. Besides the workshops on speaking, it's fun just to hang out, go swimming, play games and order pizza with friends.

"He can turn it on and speak without stuttering to his friends," his mom said, "but it's exhausting."

Many of the kids attending the convention are uncomfortable the first day of the convention, but by the dance Saturday night, their shared bond makes them fast friends.

"Chasing after fluency can be blinding," convention co-founder Lee Caggiano said. "When parents realize their kids can be whatever they want, they stop fighting stuttering, which turns everything around. It makes stuttering a lot easier to deal with. The tension is no longer there."