

Walk for Shea is April 23

Event raises money for SMA research.

By Bonnie Hobbs
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Shea Megale

The 9th annual Walk for Shea is Sunday, April 23, and Shea Megale will be leading the way with her companion dog Mercer. But that's to be expected.

"She and Mercer are like puzzle pieces," said Shea's mom, Megan Megale. "They're just absolutely inseparable."

A FIFTH-GRADER at Virginia Run Elementary, Shea, 10 1/2, has SMA (spinal muscular atrophy), a rare, incurable form of muscular dystrophy, and money raised from this event helps find a cure.

Nearly 650 people participated in last year's 5K walk, raising more than \$25,000 for research. But so much more is still needed — although, as far as Shea's concerned, the proceeds are for other children.

"I'm fine the way I am," she said. "I can buzz around in my wheelchair. It's important to raise enough money to help other kids who don't have wheelchairs."

Held rain or shine, the Walk for Shea begins at 9 a.m. at the Virginia Run Community Center, at Pleasant Valley Road and Wetherburn Court, off Route 29 in Centreville. Register at www.walkforshea.com. Cost is \$6, adults and \$4, children under 18; children under 2 are free; strollers and friendly dogs are welcome.

Shea's the youngest of Megan and Larry Megale's three children and is definitely spunky, cheerful and full of life. Appropriately enough, Megan works for a biotechnology company seeking a cure for SMA. Larry is an engineer with Blackbird Technologies and coaches Centreville High's varsity lacrosse team.

Shea's sister Kelley, 16, is a sophomore at Westfield High, and brother Matthew, 15, is a freshman. And as always, the whole family will participate in the walk — including Mercer, a black Labrador who just turned 4.

He came from Canine Companions for Independence, which trains dogs from birth and places them with people with disabilities. Then each dog is trained specifically to meet its new owner's individual needs.

AND SHEA idolizes Mercer. "He gives me the confidence I need, being in a wheelchair," she said. "And he's my best buddy. He sleeps in my bed — both our heads are on the pillow."

At school, Mercer snoozes under her desk. But he stays awake at night in case she needs

something. For example, if she's cold, he'll pull up her blankets to keep her warm. And whenever she calls his name, he springs into action, ready to do whatever task she needs. Mercer opens doors for her, turns on lights, picks up anything she drops and carries her backpack.

A true pal, he even goes shopping with Shea. She gives him the money for purchases, and he jumps on the counter, gives it to the clerk, waits for change, gives it to Shea and then carries the bag of merchandise through the mall.

Now she's teaching Mercer how to kiss. "I put peanut butter on my face and say, 'Kisses!' and he licks it off," she explained. "Then I'll take the peanut butter off and say 'Kisses' so he'll learn to do it without the peanut butter."

Shea enjoys swimming and has water therapy, plus physical therapy, every week. She also loves traveling, visiting relatives in New York, hanging out with friends and playing lacrosse with her dad and siblings. And when it's time to relax, she loves playing video games on her Nintendo Game Cube or watching TV while munching on popcorn and chips.

Her favorite shows are "SpongeBob SquarePants," "The Simpsons," "That's So Raven," "Family Guy" and "The Koala Brothers" (on the Disney channel). She also likes "Home Improvement," "American Idol" and "Family Feud."

IN ADDITION, Shea has fun helping her mom garden — both flowers and vegetables — and going out for pizza at Ciro's in Centreville Square with her dad. She also helps him coach lacrosse at Centreville High — a pretty neat gig for an elementary schooler.

"I encourage the players and tell them what to work on," she said. "The team even has a special, secret 'Shea Play' named after me. It's kinda cool."

In school, her favorite subject is social studies. "It's interesting to learn about what happened here before to the ground I walk on," she said. "Or, in my case, wheel on."

Lots of children like Shea will benefit from the upcoming walk. And those who can't participate in person may send donations to: Families of Spinal Muscular Atrophy, P.O. Box 196, Libertyville, Ill. 60048.