

Gliding Stars boosts confidence of kids and adults with disabilities



Gliding Stars of Greater Toledo skaters and volunteers line up as they cheer themselves on with their group cry of 'I can skate.'

# 'I can do it. I can skate'

By ANN WEBER  
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**O**n a Sunday afternoon in January, 10-year-old Conor Smenner pushed his walker on the rink at Tam-O-Shanter all by himself.

He was triumphant.

His mother was in tears.

"Last year he couldn't even stand up on the ice," said Wendy Smenner of West Toledo.

That's just one of the success stories that are being written on the frozen surface at the Sylvania sports complex by children and adults who have disabilities. They meet weekly from September to March for group ice skating lessons provided by the nonprofit Gliding Stars of Greater Toledo ([glidingstars.org/toledo.html](http://glidingstars.org/toledo.html)), formed in 2008 as one of seven local chapters of Gliding Stars, Inc. based in Amherst, N.Y. Ohio's only other chapter is in Findlay.

Ranging in age from 3 to 30-plus, the skaters have a mix of disabilities, physical and mental. Those don't stop them — they overcome them with the help of volunteers, harnesses, specially designed walkers, and adaptive skates.

You can see for yourself when the group stages its annual ice show March 28 at Tam-O-Shanter. Tickets to the 2:30 to 4:30 p.m. fund-raiser are \$5, with proceeds helping to cover the gap between what each skater pays for the six-month session (\$125) and the actual cost of equipment and ice time (about \$1,300 per participant, according to chapter founder and coordinator Bill Himmel of Sylvania).

"I can do it. I can skate," they chant, pumping fists, to open their regular Sunday afternoon session. One group practices routines for the upcoming show. Other skaters work on basic skills such as balance and gliding. Some circle the rink slowly, upright with volunteers on each side or standing or sitting in a walker that's built to glide over the surface. Some advanced "Stars" skate unassisted.

This is therapeutic, but they don't think of it that way.

"They're out there having fun and hanging out with their friends," said Derek Helmke of West Toledo, a volunteer instructor for the beginners.

"There are very few recreational activities for children and adults with disabilities," noted Jean Abercrombie of Monclova Township, a board member and volunteer whose son Josh, 7, is in the advanced class. "Gliding Stars is one of those nice recreational activities where they get to be like other kids."

It's special for the parents and grandparents, too, who don't have the same opportunities to sit in the stands with a video camera, cheering and applauding their kids.

"At the end of the ice show every year the Stars get a medal for their accomplishments," Mrs. Abercrombie said. "We never thought he would be in a sport or a show."

Jodi Heisler of Petersburg, Mich., a member of the chapter's advisory board, marvels at her son Josh's ability to skate.

"To watch him on the ice is just amazing," she said. "When he was born they weren't sure he was ever going to walk and talk."

Now 5, Josh skates in the beginner's group and has made significant improvements in stamina and balance, Mrs. Heisler said.

Advanced skater Joey Walker, 12-year-old son of Michael and Diane Walker of Temperance, sounded like any other boy his age when he said what he likes about ice skating.

"I like to go very fast," he replied before rushing back to the ice.

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Cayden Greenblatt, 3, of Sylvania, gets some help from volunteers Renee Ziemkiewicz, left, and Danielle Hunt, 15, of Rossford.



Schylar Young, 11, who is deaf and blind, gives volunteers Alex Langenderfer, 20, left, and Eric Seremet, 24, a hug after an afternoon skating session.



The group gets instructions from Jillian Prosek, center, before practicing.



Above: Julia Rothschild, 15, left, with Rich Shiltz, of South Amherst, Ohio, and Lillianna Rodriguez, 5, of Temperance, who is using a Hula Hoop for stability.

Right: Pat Hamblin, left, his daughter, Zoe, and Margot Jacobs practice the pinwheel.



Kaitlyn Morrin, 15, of Temperance, is triumphant after successfully completing a spin.

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