

## ANNUAL FAMILY CAFÉ COOKS UP FEAST OF FUN AND FACTS

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The Family Café is a free conference for Floridians of all ages with disabilities and their families to learn about the latest developments in the Florida disability community and to attend the annual Florida “Governor’s Summit on Disabilities.” I have been attending Family Café for over ten years, and I still feel the same sense of wonder and excitement now as I did at my first Café.

This is in part because the atmosphere is fun, warm, friendly, and inclusive. There is always something fun to do for everyone and there are new and interesting things to learn at the Café, whether it is information on disability advocacy, an invention that helps people with disabilities, or a law that fights discrimination.



However, the main reason for my wonder and excitement – my favorite part of attending Family Café – is getting to meet new friends and see old friends again. Many of the people at Café



attend the conference every year, the result being that you begin to see familiar faces at each conference. For some, like myself, Family Café serves as an annual family reunion of sorts. After attending the conference even once, you make some very close friends – to the point that they become your second family. But because of time and distance restrictions, we are unable to see each other at any other time of the year. So when

the three days of Family Café rolls around each year, there is a great deal of anticipation, happiness, and joy when you see your “family” again.

Ultimately, friendship is the defining trait of Family Café. It is the heart of Family Café because there is a sense of acceptance and belonging at the conference that doesn’t exist to the same extent outside of the conference. Many attendees spend all but three days of their year

experiencing stares, strange questions, and even discrimination. However, for the three days each June that the conference is held, all of that goes away. For those three days, everyone is kind to each other and no one is viewed as “less than” anyone else. For those three days, everyone is welcomed.



This year marked the 18<sup>th</sup> Annual Family Café, and it was held from June 10–12 at the Hyatt Regency hotel in Orlando, Florida. According to Family Café founder and organizer Lori Fahey, this year’s conference was the largest in history: approximately 10,000 people in attendance, over 160 training sessions, and more than 100 booths filled the exhibition hall. The Café also featured fun activities, including a Gatorland wildlife show, rock climbing wall, photo booth with



Superman, and a fashion show. Each Family Café features three keynote speakers and two and a half days of workshops, which are informational presentations given by professionals, business owners, governmental agencies, and self-advocates covering diverse topics such as education, employment, starting a business, social security, Medicaid, technology, medicine, and advocacy. In addition, Family Café provides many activities for individuals with disabilities like paddle boarding, scuba diving, and sensory rooms.



The conference also has an exhibition hall filled with booths sponsored by vendors, businesses, and government agencies with the goal of letting attendees discover new products and services, or speak to agency representatives to help them with problems they are facing

This year’s “Governor’s Summit on Disabilities”

featured information relating to the disability community. The biggest news announced at the summit was the introduction of the ABLE Trust, a savings account for people with disabilities that allows them to save money above the \$2,000 limit set by Social Security, as well as the news that, as a result of increased funding, 5,000 individuals will come off the 20,000 people waiver waitlist this year. The summit was attended by Governor Rick Scott, members of the Florida Legislature such as Senate President Andy Gardiner, and heads of governmental agencies such as Barbara Palmer of the Agency for Persons with Disabilities, Pam Stewart of the Department of Education, and Florida Surgeon General Celeste Phillip.

The Family Café conference isn’t just about education and policy, though. It is also about having fun and making new friends--and the fun begins with the hotel. Each year, the hotel chosen for the conference has something for everyone: massive pools for kids to play in, restaurants for families to dine at, and much more. This year’s hotel was no exception. The Hyatt Regency had three pools to choose from, the largest of which featured a water slide and other amenities. The

Regency also had numerous eateries, including bars for the adults, an up-scale restaurant, and a 50's-style diner.



The fun continues with the conference itself. Throughout the three-day event, DJs pumped music throughout the convention hall, enticing children and adults alike to dance. Performance groups, such as bands, a choir, and a dance troupe, performed throughout the Café as well, and they entertained large crowds with their talents. And there were lots of giveaways, with prizes ranging from gift cards to PCs.

The culmination of the fun was a massive dance party that was held on Saturday night. For more than two hours, hundreds of attendees packed a large ballroom and danced the night away to all kinds of popular music. Children and adults “raised the roof,” breakdanced, and danced free style. There were organized dances as well, with songs like “YMCA” and the “Cha-Cha Slide” bringing everyone together to dance in unison. The sense of excitement and pure joy that filled the ballroom was infectious.

For more information on Family Café, visit [www.familycafe.org](http://www.familycafe.org).