

MEDIA WATCH

Baumhower: Next year, close Conant Street for Project iAm

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Northwest Ohio is known for its signature events: The Jamie Farr Toledo Classic, Susan G. Komen Race for the Cure, Mud Hens Opening Day, and after what I experienced on March 10, Project iAm's Acoustics for Autism. The all-day music festival happened in Uptown Maumee at The Village Idiot and Buster Brown's and the thousands who attended, bore witness to its evolution from the vision of a charitable woman with a big heart and a guitar to an event that will give lifetime memories and change lives.



Jeremy BAUMHOWER

Nicole Khoury, the face and founder of Project iAm, has created a signature event in a small Northwest Ohio town, not from greed but from love.

Project iAm's concept is simple; it's a local charity that raises awareness and money for families with children who fall under the spectrum of autism — families like mine. The money raised creates scholarships for early intervention programs, which are key to young children with autism. The never-mentioned larger quality of Project iAm is that it creates a support group and network for those families dealing with children, who are not "normal," but in the most beautiful of ways.

This was the sixth annual Acoustics for Autism and from the start, the vibe was different. The family-friendly event featured three stages, highlighting more than 30 local musicians and included a kids' workshop tent. Calen Savidge, who opened the main stage inside The Village Idiot, began playing at 12:30 p.m. and by 1 p.m. the place was packed. I was amazed at how busy it got, but more importantly by how much earlier the crowd came and stayed. During the previous five years, people did not start filing in until 4 p.m. and slowly started exiting a little after 8 p.m. — but this year was different.

The feeling and vibe inside The Village Idiot was one of the best I have ever felt, not just in Northwest Ohio, but anywhere. Imagine the crowd from OB's on St. Patrick's Day, crossed with the fellowship of any church festival's chicken dinner on Sunday and an all-day music festival. That is how it felt in Maumee that day. It wasn't just a charity event — it felt like the wedding reception for your favorite couple.

The 35-minute set times for the local musicians created the perfect soundtrack. Each artist played his or her greatest hits and crowd pleasers to near perfection. At times, the packed crowd sang louder than the PA system, and at others made the building shake with their dancing.

As near perfect as this event was, next year it can be bigger. More than \$25,000 was raised on a single block, on a Sunday in Maumee. Thousands of people experienced the beauty that town offers while only seeing the insides of a couple of businesses. The City of Maumee should recognize the success of Project iAm, and take measures to make it bigger. Next year, if you close down the 300 block of Conant Street, this event becomes a festival. Establishments like Dale's and the Maumee Theatre give even more options for planning such an event.

Autism affects one in 100 and that number is changing daily. The closing of Conant Street for an event or holiday is not without precedent. Every year, Opening Day for Maumee Little League features a parade through Uptown.

This event celebrates children and America's pastime, but not every child can play baseball. Let's shut it down for one more day, and really make a difference, not just in Maumee, but regionally.

The highlight of the day came from the stage inside The Idiot. Joe Woods' cover of "Man in the Mirror" perfectly captured the moment. Michael Jackson's words challenged us to make a difference ... the very difference Khoury's vision was making.

To find out more about Project iAm, visit www.projectiam.com.