

IN CONCERT

Musicians unite for Acoustics for Autism fundraiserWritten by Sarah Ottney | Editor in Chief | sottney@toledofreepress.com

Acoustics for Autism. The name has a certain ring to it, Dave Carpenter said to fellow musician Nicole Khoury one night at a Toledo bar.

"He was like, 'Isn't this a cool name for something?' And I was like, 'Yeah, and that was it. I didn't think about it again,' Khoury said. "Two months later, I was like, 'Remember when you said that? This is what I want to do.'

"That is literally how it happened. I developed a charity, Project iAm, so we could have the event. I thought it was going to be one benefit, one time. I had no idea it was going to turn into a full-blown 501(c)3."

The event drew about 500 people and raised \$8,000 in its first year.

"All of a sudden there were so many people saying, 'You've got to keep doing this. This is awesome.' I said, 'All right, fine!' Little did I know," she said, laughing.

Now in its seventh year, Project iAm's charity concert has grown into one of the area's largest and most anticipated music events of the year. National acts like Skid Row, Rusted Root and George Clinton have taken notice and support the charity. Project iAm has given more than \$40,000 to area families for autism treatments.

"It's like kicking a snowball off a mountain," Carpenter said. "It just started to get bigger and bigger."

This year's event, set for noon to 2 a.m. March 9 in downtown Maumee, will feature more than 30 bands on three stages. The main stage will be at The Village Idiot, 309 Conant St., with a second stage and a tent stage down the street at Buster Brown's. There is no admission cost, but there will be a "karma box" for donations as well as raffle tickets and a silent auction.

Auction items include Coach bags, Kate Spade purses, a stay in a Charleston, S.C., condo, a beach cruiser, a tailgate set, spa days, an asphalt sealing package, gift certificates to local restaurants and businesses and more. Keys to a Plexiglas "vault" filled with more items will also be sold. The winning key will be the one that opens the vault.

There will be pizza from The Village Idiot, gourmet bratwurst from Aunt Carla's Boosh and a bake sale.

At least 20 of the groups have been involved with the event since day one, Carpenter said.

"Every single musician who plays is a headliner," he said. "From a concert perspective, you just get to sit back and literally every 40 minutes see a new act. It would take you forever to travel around Toledo and see all these people. It's an eclectic mix."

Musician Kyle White is one of the local acts who performs each year.

"For me, it's getting to see all the amazing musicians in Toledo that I never get to see because we're all playing at the same time," White said. "There's just such crazy good energy. You can feel the positive energy when you walk in that room. Anyone who has ever been to this event always comes back."

Before going into music full-time, White planned to work with children with autism as a school psychologist.

"I might still go into music therapy and one of the reasons I'd like to go into that is to work with kids with autism," White said.

This year, for the first time, a benefit CD, "Acoustics for Autism," will be available.

Musicians on the CD include Carpenter, White, Khoury's band Arctic Clam, John Barile, Zak Ward, Jeff Stewart, Bulletproof Snow, Anthony Beck, Poormercy, The Eight Fifteens, Chris Shutters, Pat Lewandowski, Joe Woods, Wilson Lake and the Rock Bass and Empire Drift.

"We've been talking about doing this for years," said Khoury, who approached Toledo Free Press Editor in Chief Michael S. Miller in December about helping her produce a CD. "It really came together pretty quickly."

The CDs will debut at the Acoustics for Autism show and sell for \$10. They will then be available online for \$15.

Both Khoury and Carpenter have friends with autistic children so they knew a need was there.

"What people don't understand is that this stuff isn't covered by insurance," Khoury said. "And there isn't a single treatment. There are a gazillion different things you can try for your kid and it might work and it might not. The whole goal of the charity is to find something that makes you as a family and you as a parent feel comfortable that your child is progressing. They may never speak, but there are still different strides they can make.

"A lot of these kids don't want personal contact. You can't hug them. I've had hugs from some of these kids and you immediately just start crying," Khoury said. "I've had applications that I've had to stop reading in the middle because it's too emotional to deal with."

Thomas "Sully" Sullivan of The Village Idiot is another of Khoury's biggest supporters. He previously worked as a direct care provider for kids with autism.

"They do a lot of good with this event," Sullivan said. "The bands are really interesting and a lot of kids benefit."

Another big supporter is Skid Row. Khoury met the band in Toledo in 2000 after working security at one of their concerts. The group headlined a "Plugged-In" Project iAm fundraising concert in Toledo in 2009.

"Anyone that knows Nicole is aware that her dedication and tenacity is like no other," Skid Row's Rachel Bolan wrote in an email to Toledo Free Press. "When she first told me about Project iAm and Acoustics for Autism, I knew it would be successful.

"I knew immediately if Nicole was involved, it must be something special. [That] along with the fact that one of my best friends has a son with autism made the decision to participate very easy.

"We were honored when Nicole invited us to play. I believe that was a turning point for the foundation. She was bringing it to a new level. What was local became regional. And what was regional became national. Meeting some of the kids and their parents was inspiring. We would do it again in a heartbeat."

Acoustics for Autism will always be held at The Village Idiot, Khoury said.

"You've got to be loyal to the people who have been loyal to you. This is where it needs to be. This is the CBGB of the Midwest," she said.

It's gratifying to see Acoustics for Autism succeed, Carpenter said.

"[Khoury is] the hardest working person ever. This would not be in existence if it wasn't for her. I have a lot of great ideas, but following through on them is not one of my strong points. She is phenomenal. She's like the Energizer Bunny."

"It's really, really cool to see everybody get together for the right reasons," Khoury said. "It's the best event in town."

For more information, visit the website aboutprojectiam.com.