

Families enjoy a sensory-friendly showing of *The Polar Express* at Cinemark 14 in Chico in December.  
PHOTO COURTESY OF HARVEST IVERSON-FOURNOY

Far Northern Regional Center and Little Red Hen, which each provide services for people with developmental disabilities.

There was so much interest that Iverson-Flournoy had to create a wait list. For the second event, which will be held March 25 for those 17 and younger and their families, she created a GoFundMe page and successfully crowdfunded enough money to cover the fee.

## Creating a comfortable space

Sensory sensitivity varies for every person, and some can be over- or under-stimulated by their environment. Josie Blagrove, director of the Chico State Autism Clinic, has worked with local children with autism since 2003, helping them develop motor skills and embrace physical fitness. She is also a mother of two children who have autism.

Blagrove described sensory sensitivity as the feeling that “the world is a little too much.”

“Everything is too loud or too bright, or there’s too much visual stimuli going on,” she said.

With sensory-friendly accommodations, however, children are able to acclimate to the environment so they can enjoy themselves, she said.

Blagrove is also part of a local parent group that helped spread the word about the special movie screening at Cinemark, and said she was really excited to hear about it. Events like this not only help promote awareness but also create community for parents and families that could otherwise remain isolated.

“It is really hard to take a lot of our kids on the spectrum to these events, because you’re not trying to ruin anybody else’s experience but you want your own kids to have those neurotypical experiences and be out in the community,” she said.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many parents

have been unable to access early intervention services or get connected to parental support groups, Blagrove said. This offers them a comfortable space to make those connections and be accepted.

“That’s one of the important things that comes out of this—that sense of community being built back up again,” she said. “Sometimes you just want to be in a safe space with people who get you.”

Iverson-Flournoy said that was one of the profound things she noticed at the sensory-friendly screening—“that nervous energy” wasn’t there. Parents were able to relax and realize “nobody’s going to judge you,” and their kids were able to do the same.

“The big thing was just getting to watch [Charlie] really enjoy something that was tailored to sensory needs—there was no, *I’m going to get overwhelmed half-way through*,” she said. “I like the idea of a world that [Charlie] can grow up in that will accept him.”

It wasn’t just Charlie who had his first movie theater experience that day, she added. One boy was in tears when he arrived with his family because he was scared about the new experience. But by the time he left, he had a big smile on his face. □

NEWSLINES CONTINUED ON PAGE 11



Harvest Iverson-Flournoy and her son Charlie on his first day of the 2022-23 school year.  
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