

Fishing for Kids

The Socialist

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Event: Fishing for Kids Tournament

Setting: Sept. 3, 2009, South Terminal, Vancouver International Airport

Critique: Fin-tastic!

Every September since 2006, the West Coast Fishing Club has held a tournament to benefit sick children in British Columbia, an endeavour that has raised more than \$1.5 million to date. This year the Canucks Autism Network joined BC Children's Hospital in sponsoring the event. Founded by Paolo Aquilini and his wife, Clara, CAN advocates for kids with autism. (The Aquilini's son Christian was diagnosed with autism in 1996.) And diagnoses are on the rise: in 1996, medical officials determined that one in 13,000 British Columbian children had autism. Today that number is one in 7000.

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Autism is complicated. Unlike other conditions known for their coloured ribbons – autism's is a pastiche of puzzle pieces in rainbow hues – those who live with it are usually unable to speak out to ask for help. With Rain Man still the disorder's benchmark cultural reference, it's the crucial task of organizations like CAN to provide support, raise public awareness, and teach compassion.

The \$132,750 raised at this year's Fishing for Kids will help bring sport and outreach programs to 30 schools in B.C. – a significant increase from last year's total of three. "The response has been overwhelming," says Paolo Aquilini. "We feel that every child with autism has a lot to contribute, but that needs to be harnessed. They need to be empowered."

With almost 7,000 *identified* cases of autism present in Lower Mainland schools, it's a massive undertaking. CAN, however, is committed: "We had 200 families come to our open skate last winter," says Aquilini. "I had mothers telling me that it was the first time they were able to go out as a family. To me, that's a beautiful thing."