



Benefit to feature Olympian

[Event organizer to auction swim lessons from Mark Spitz at fundraiser designed to benefit autism research.](#)

By Michael Alexander

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For the right price this weekend, you can donate to help autism-related charities and the Newport-Mesa Unified School District's special education programs, then get a swim lesson with a man who won seven gold medals at a single Summer Olympics.

No, not Michael Phelps, but the man whose record he eclipsed.

Mark Spitz, the swimmer who smashed records in 1972 in Munich, is donating the hourlong lesson as an auction item in "A Night For Autism," a fundraiser Saturday for Easter Seals of Southern California, Talk about Curing Autism, the Autism Society of America, and the school district's autism programs.

Spitz, who is friends with the event organizer's father, said he has offered such lessons in the past to a wide variety of people, from a donor's competitive swimmer son who wanted to talk about the philosophy of being a champion, to a woman six months' pregnant who wanted to see what she could handle in the water. Spitz called it usually enjoyable for him, and said he recognized the fantasy-come-true aspect of the prize.

"A lot of times they just want that contact," he said. "If you had an hour with Kobe Bryant, would you want him to try to turn you into a pro? Sure, if you're young and driven, maybe you want him to look at your free throw and give you some pointers. But for an older guy where it's more like a fantasy, you're going to want to go one-on-one with him, and maybe he lets you make a shot."

Other attendees include TV's "Real Housewives of Orange County's" Jo De La Rosa and Mrs. Orange County International Shana Smith.

For the event's host, Barry Saywitz, president of the Newport Beach-based Saywitz

Company, this is personal — his 4-year-old son was diagnosed with autism two years ago, and he learned fast how much he needed outside help.

“I didn’t know anything about it, and I didn’t know what to do,” he said. “I did a lot of research online, read a lot of books and started going to conferences.... There is some help out there from the county, in terms of services they provide, but it is limited.”

These days, his son is making progress in the school district’s preschool programs, but Saywitz says there is a powerful need for more research and support.

“The greater awareness about what it is, more funding available for those programs, the more research they can do, and the more tests they can do,” he said.

The idea for a fundraiser came together fast, just 75 days from brainstorming to completion, Saywitz said.

Surprisingly, in a tough economy, companies were falling over themselves to contribute, he added. Now, he added, the event is on track to raise \$250,000 or more.

“There was an overwhelming desire for companies to be willing to participate and donate their services and time for it, even with the economy the way it is,” he said. “Nobody from a corporate standpoint hasn’t been excited or open or willing to help.”

Tickets are close to sold out for the fundraiser, which will be at Saywitz’s home in the Belcourt community at 7 p.m., 9 Chadbourne Court, Newport Beach. For more information, go to www.aneveningforautism.org.



Orange County Real Estate Entrepreneur Barry Saywitz with his son Ryan, 4, who was diagnosed with autism at the age of 2.