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INFLUENTIAL LEADERS IN SAN DIEGO

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LAW

Robert Shields

For all his work as an attorney, perhaps Shields' biggest impact takes place outside the courtroom. Since 2011, the partner at Wilson Turner Kosmo and his wife, Cheryl, have organized "A Night to Remember," a prom for special needs students throughout San Diego County.

The free event allows young adults with autism, Down syndrome, cerebral palsy and other physical challenges to enjoy the annual rite of passage that otherwise would not be available to them.

"I'd say it's the most meaningful thing my family has been a part of," Rob Shields said.

Approximately 800 student from 70 area high schools attend "A Night to Remember" each spring, including 400 special needs students and the able-bodied students with whom they are paired.

"The whole reason we [pair students] is so that students without special needs develop an understanding that students with special needs aren't that much different; they like the same movies and doing the same activities," he said. "It's to promote inclusion. And because of the event, we've seen inclusion at other high schools."

The girls are given dresses – outfitted in a "Say Yes to the Dress"-type event several weeks before the prom – and the boys get tuxedos. Every attendee arrives in a



Wilson Turner Kosmo | PARTNER

limo and walks down a red carpet into the prom venue.

Shields said the response from the community has been overwhelming.

"The first year we had no idea whether the community would embrace it or even if anyone would come," he said. "The coolest part of the night is when the kids get out of the limo and exit onto a 300-foot-long red carpet. Hundreds and hundreds of random people from the community come out to cheer them on."

Previous participants return to the event

after graduating from high school to cheer on their friends, and one student even decided to become a special education teacher because of "A Night to Remember."

"I'm excited that students with special needs are viewed differently now because they've been included and accepted," Shields said. "Eastlake High School is a lot more integrated because of the prom, and it'd be cool to see a lot more high schools become like Eastlake."

— Doug Sherwin