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'Stashes sprout for a good cause

EDWARD MUGICA shaves off Sean Chavarria's beard at American Barbershop in Orange on Thursday in preparation for a Moustaches For Kids fundraiser benefiting Beyond Blindness.



Eric Licas

Beyond Blindness has teamed up with Moustaches for Kids to raise more than \$100,000.

BY MATT SZABO

Brian Samaniego usually stays pretty clean shaven.

Sometimes the Orange resident will rock a beard, but that's about it. Nothing too crazy.

"I don't grow a mustache," he said with a laugh. I can grow a beard with a mustache, but just a mustache, I look ridiculous ... It's a conversation starter."

That last bit is exactly the point. Samaniego wants people to ask him about the unique facial hair he will be growing over the next month to raise funds for a nonprofit that's dear to his heart, Santa Ana-based Beyond Blindness.

The Orange County chapter of Moustaches for Kids has selected Beyond Blindness as its benefactor for this year's "growing season," which officially kicked off Thursday night.

American Barbershop in Orange offered 40 clean shaves to many of this year's group of growers, including Samaniego.

See *Cause*, page A10

CAUSE

Continued from page A1

The growers list is expected to reach into the triple digits for the first time.

Samaniego has already raised more than \$5,000, while Moustaches for Kids typically raises more than \$100,000 each year for its nonprofit of choice.

Samaniego knows the money will be well received. He said his son, Krew, who turns 4 next month, was born with cataracts and glaucoma in both eyes. After testing at Children's Hospital of Orange County, UCLA and Children's Hospital of Los Angeles, he was diagnosed with a rare genetic disorder called Lowe Syndrome, which mainly affects brain development, the eyes and kidney function.

Krew, the middle of three children, started going to Beyond Blindness when he was just several months old. He was provided with various therapies including physical, occupational, vision and speech.

He was recently due to enter the Orange Unified School District, but after

some negotiations it was decided that Krew could stay with Beyond Blindness until he was 6, Brian Samaniego said.

He started walking with assistance at age 2. This past year, he started walking on his own.

"It's given us hope and it's showed us that there are no boundaries, there are no labels," Brian Samaniego said. "He is a fighter. Without Beyond Blindness, I truly don't believe that he'd be at the point he's at in his life, with the progress that he's made."

Beyond Blindness was a finalist to be the Moustaches for Kids benefactor last year, but this year it was chosen. Moustaches for Kids chapter president Tim Kearns said the final decision was made based on a competition of the drinking game quarters.

Following Thursday's clean shave, a launch event was held across the street at the District Lounge in Orange. There will be more fun weekly events for growers — a wine and paint date night, a trivia night, a pub crawl — leading up to the annual "Stache Bash"

growing season wrap-up party on June 8 at the MET in Costa Mesa.

"We want to meet them where they're at, and that's why all of the events are held at bars and breweries," Kearns said. "We're not trying to get these guys to do anything that they wouldn't normally do. We're trying to create an environment that feels conducive, feels like it's just an average day grabbing a beer with your buddy ... We're changing the way men perceive charity service and what it means to give back to our community, and we're doing it one 'stache at a time."

Beyond Blindness President and CEO Angie Rowe said that regarding the financial aspects, the partnership is valuable to get the nonprofit's name out there to more people.

Plus, she just thinks the idea of growing mustaches for charity is fun.

"When it comes to philanthropy and donating, who makes those philanthropic decisions in the household?" Rowe said. "It's typically the female, right? What's really cool is



JULIE SAMANIEGO brushes the clean-shaven cheek of her husband, Brian Samaniego, at American Barbershop in Orange on Thursday.

Eric Licas

to see this group of men who come together to fund raise for a collective cause. They're engaged at such a high level in philanthropy, and they're doing it without the pushing or prodding of their partners, spouses, girlfriends, sisters, aunts, moms, whatever. I think it's a pretty cool concept to see that power behind a group of men wanting to fund raise and be philanthropic."

The Samaniego family is happy to continue going to

Beyond Blindness. Julie Samaniego, Brian's wife, said the organization has been welcoming of their other children as well, 6-year-old Bodhe and 16-month-old Scarlette.

Bodhe's kindergarten teacher at St. Norbert Catholic School has a daughter who was born blind, Julie said. That family is also a Beyond Blindness client.

"It's kind of a funny coincidence," she said, adding that the teacher has

had Bodhi bring Krew into the classroom to share about his younger brother. "We definitely feel like we've been blessed in so many ways."

As for her husband growing his 'stache for the next month, she's ready for that, too.

"It's going to be fun," Julie Samaniego said with a smile. "Definitely out of the norm."

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