SummerAde offers equal opportunity for all

Corte Madera doc finds solution for seasonal struggles

By Gregory Andersen
Marinscope Newspapers | 0 comments

SummerAde pairs high school volunteers with special-needs children during their time at summer camp. The pairing not only provides the children with positive mentors but also enables the children to attend camps that might otherwise be inaccessible.

“During the summer it became readily apparent that after school is out these are kids that don’t have a place to go,” SummerAde Director Tina Gabby said. “They can’t go to camp by themselves because they need more support.”

Gabby is a behavioral and developmental pediatrician in Corte Madera, and it was this initial assessment that sparked her interest in finding a healthy and enjoyable outlet for children with special needs during the summer months.

“We’re definitely filling a need in the community,” Gabby said. “And I think it’s a need that exists throughout the Bay Area, if not nationwide.”

In 2008, after discussions with parents of many of her patients about the lack of summer options for children...
with disabilities, Gabby organized a trial run for what would eventually become SummerAde. She paired her niece with one of her patients and was gratified by the results. By the following summer, the program was in full swing.

SummerAde, now in its fourth season, coordinates with summer camps in cities throughout Marin County, including Mill Valley, Belvedere, Larkspur and Corte Madera.

Camp Edventure More, aka Edmo, a summer program that offers hands-on science projects and other educational activities, has worked with SummerAde for the past three years. According to Seth Dahlgren, director for Camp Edmo, the presence of SummerAde participants has a positive effect that reaches beyond the camper and volunteer.

"It has a huge impact on the other kids at camp who wouldn’t have otherwise had these kids around," Dahlgren said. "There are huge benefits in teamwork and social interaction for the other kids at camp because of SummerAde."

Last week’s theme for Camp Edmo, held at Hall Middle School in Larkspur, was “Gizmos and Game Inventors.” SummerAde participant Max, 6, and his mentor, Lucy King, 15, spent Friday morning mastering a spinning gadget made from a marble and a compact disc. According to Lucy, the best part of working with SummerAde was simply getting to know Max.

This year is the first time Lucy has volunteered with SummerAde. She learned about the program through her brother who, like Max, was diagnosed with autism.

Word-of-mouth publicity has played a large role in the growth of SummerAde. Gabby’s children help locate peers for volunteer work at their high school, and her clinic provides a steady stream of families in need.

“We calculated we’re providing over 1,000 hours of respite this summer,” Gabby said. "Last year we had 20 kids, and we’re at about 38 this year."

SummerAde has also grown in its ability to accommodate all its participants. “This year we’ve started serving kids in wheelchairs,” Gabby said, “which is very different for us. Usually, it’s been children who have more developmental and behavioral problems — ADHD, autism, Asperger’s, cerebral palsy — and that’s the unique thing about this program, that we can help lots of different types of kids.”

In the past year, SummerAde has achieved nonprofit status, which allows it to accept donations. Gabby says it plans to host more fundraising events during the off season. She hopes the organization will be able to find a sponsor in the near future because, currently, the staff is all volunteers.

“I’d love to see this program continue to grow,” Gabby said. “We’ve almost doubled the volume of children we’re serving this year. The real question is how big and how fast we can grow.”

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