

# **Breaking Barriers**

**everybody belongs • everybody serves**

**SPRING 2014 (Summer camping)**

## **Summer Camp: A Place to Thrive**

**by Mark Watson**

Fowler board of trustees

As a regular volunteer cabin counselor at Camp Fowler in the Adirondack Mountains of New York, I'm reminded of Forrest Gump's favorite saying: "Life is like a box of chocolates; you never know what you're going to get." I've had kids with ADHD, kids taking "medication vacations," kids on the autism spectrum, homesick kids (for me, the most challenging), and a boy with Down syndrome.

Sydney was 17 when he walked into my cabin for his first-ever week at camp. I always try not to prejudge how kids will do during the week and instead let things play out, but with Sydney I was a little concerned that I may have my hands full in keeping a sense of serenity in the cabin. Sydney is a big, strong kid with unlimited energy. I was glad that I had the luxury that week of being joined by a second cabin counselor, allowing us to spend extra time with Sydney when necessary.

The first thing I noticed was that Sydney was better organized than all of the other boys and was the only one

who didn't need to be reminded to brush his teeth. During the first day and throughout the week, I marveled at the extent to which the other kids embraced Sydney, joining him during his high times and actually counseling him during his lows. The week was culminated with Sydney's cabin mates serving as back-up singers to his rendition of a Black-Eyed Peas song in the Friday night Java Jam.

At the end of the week I felt so proud of Sydney and his ability to thrive. But the ones who benefited most from Sydney's presence at camp were the other kids who truly fell in love with him, as evidenced by the hugs and tears when it was time to go home.

Camp provides an opportunity to start fresh and leave baggage at home, to step outside of one's comfortable group of friends, and sometimes be exposed to people who on the outside might just appear to be a little different. But by the end of the week, I've always found it's clear to the kids, as well as the adults, that we all are God's children, that God's love is limitless, and that there is no better way to acknowledge that love than by sharing it with one another (for more information, visit [www.campfowler.org](http://www.campfowler.org)).

## **Themes**

**Spring 2014—Summer camping.** This issue explores how summer camps welcome and engage campers with disabilities.

**Summer 2014—Chronic pain.** Often a hidden disability without a known cure or lasting relief, chronic pain can strain commitments as well as abilities. Please send us a note describing your experience by April 18.

Email: [mstephenson@crcna.org](mailto:mstephenson@crcna.org) • [tdeyoung@rca.org](mailto:tdeyoung@rca.org)

### **CRC, RCA Camping Opportunities**

In addition to those highlighted elsewhere in this issue, these camps affiliated with the CRC and RCA also provide a variety of accommodations for people with disabilities, including:

#### **CAMP ROGER, Rockford, MI**

[www.camproger.org](http://www.camproger.org)

Besides accommodating for dietary restrictions, Camp Roger offers additional support for one boy and one girl with special needs at each camp session. Children who qualified in prior years have included those with mild physical limitations, behavioral challenges, learning difficulties, and Down syndrome. They are placed in cabins with an extra counselor and with children their own age. Counselors are trained in behavior management techniques and demonstrate love and patience for all types of campers.

## **COUNTRYSIDE/SHALOM, Cambridge, ON**

[www.countrysidecamp.com](http://www.countrysidecamp.com)

The special needs program is Countryside's fastest-growing program and is at capacity with 140 guests per summer. Three different programs are offered for adults who have special needs. Campers are 10 years and older and many have been coming for 10 years or more. It is one of the most challenging weeks for staff but it is also the most rewarding. Many staff go on to work at group homes like Christian Horizons.

## **CRAN-HILL RANCH, Rodney, MI**

[www.cranhillranch.com](http://www.cranhillranch.com)

For more than 40 years Cran-Hill Ranch has offered summer camp experiences for individuals with mental impairments. Friendship Camp is a residential five-day summer camp opportunity for cognitively disabled campers age 15 and older that provides a safe, fun, Christian summer camp experience. Campers enjoy a wide range of outdoor activities, including arena horse rides, swimming, canoeing, crafts, fun dance parties, field games, and more. Each morning and evening campers gather for worship and a teaching time, led by volunteer chaplains. Campers stay in barrier-free cabins with adjoining bathrooms. A 1:3 ratio of trained summer staff and faithful volunteers care for campers. In addition, a recent partnership with a local school district has resulted in the creation of a special program to help students with

disabilities gain work and life experience while volunteering at camp.

**FOWLER, Speculator, NY**

[www.campfowler.org](http://www.campfowler.org) (article on page 1)

**GENEVA, Holland, MI**

[www.campgeneva.org](http://www.campgeneva.org)

Based on physical, cognitive, or emotional needs, Camp Geneva tries to offer individualized accommodations so that campers with disabilities can participate in regular programming. Campers with disabilities often become instrumental in the bonding that happens among cabin mates. Geneva relies on a registration questionnaire to provide appropriate accommodations; in some cases Geneva's coordinator for campers with special needs may follow up with parents in advance as well as resource camp counselors with appropriate strategies and skills. In hiring summer staff, experience working with children with a variety of special needs is a plus. In addition, Geneva offers "Connect," a program specifically for middle school and high school boys with high functioning autism or Asperger syndrome.

**INSPIRATION HILLS, Inwood, IA**

[www.inspirationhills.org](http://www.inspirationhills.org)

Inspiration Hills's main lodge facility provides lodging, meals, meeting space, game room, etc., all in one accessible building with an elevator and two accessible

private rooms. The layout of the other buildings and facilities are mostly on level terrain but lack hard service paths. The pool has a lift, the family cabins are accessible, and the Eaglecrest Lodge has three accessible private rooms. We have had the pleasure of hosting campers who use wheelchairs and a repeat summer counselor who used a motorized chair. Unfortunately, not all of the facilities and activities are totally accessible.

### **MANITOQUA, Frankfort, IL**

[www.manitoqua.org](http://www.manitoqua.org)

Manitoqua does not have a camp set up specifically for campers with special needs but strives to provide a camp experience to each camper that comes in a summer camp capacity or outdoor education setting. Working with parents before summer to assess individual needs, a plan is developed for each camper to be mainstreamed into day camp programs. In some cases that is simply having a discussion with the camp staff to make them aware of any special adaptations; in other cases parents send an aid to assist the camper throughout their day. During the summer there also is a day camp-style program operated for a local Christian agency for children and adults with special needs. Manitoqua staff programs the week and has a facilitator who runs the week's activities alongside adults from the agency who work individually with participants. With the same agency, Manitoqua works alongside volunteers who come to camp once a month to help with special cleaning projects in the dining hall.

## **REHOBOTH, Lacombe, AB**

[www.rehoboth.ab.ca](http://www.rehoboth.ab.ca) (see article below)

## **SERVE WINNIPEG, Winnipeg, MB**

[www.servewinnipeg.com](http://www.servewinnipeg.com) (see article on next page)

## **WARWICK, Warwick, NY**

[www.campwarwick.com](http://www.campwarwick.com)

Camp Warwick's feature program for people with special needs is Camp Sunrise, a Christian camping experience for individuals age 8-55 that provides a place where everyone is welcomed and loved. Campers take part in as many activities as their abilities allow, including swimming, canoeing, hiking, and a climbing tower. In addition, Camp Warwick also works with families to make all possible accommodations to integrate children with special needs into other camp programs.

## **Rehoboth Makes Lasting Impression**

**by Linda Rosendal**

At Rehoboth Camp, located near Gull Lake, west of Lacombe, AB, we operate all of our summer camps with volunteers. Last year 162 volunteers from Alberta, British Columbia, and other provinces offered a week of their summer to provide support and friendship to our campers.

Each year we look for volunteers to be matched up one to one with campers so they can enjoy a week of fun and fellowship through activities such as Chapel Time, where we use Friendship Ministries material to teach campers about Jesus' miracles and love for all his children. Camp activities include games, sports, crafts, swimming, bowling, campfires, and sing-a-longs. Talent Night gives campers the opportunity to perform for the rest of their friends. A highlight for many campers comes when each receives an award for something they have accomplished during the week.

Thirty-three years ago someone suggested that I might enjoy volunteering a week at Rehoboth Camp. It was an amazing experience, and Rehoboth Camp has become an important part of my life. In fact, I have not missed a week of camp since then! Rehoboth has become my career, and recently I celebrated my 27th anniversary of working at Rehoboth Christian Ministries ([www.rehoboth.ab.ca](http://www.rehoboth.ab.ca)).

### **In Winnipeg: Learn, Grow, SERVE by Shellie Power**

SERVE, a Hope Centre Ministries program in Winnipeg, MB, sponsored by Youth Unlimited, encourages congregations to commission and send youth who participate in a variety of service experiences. The faith of participants is formed through personal devotions, worship, small group learning, and service work.



Currently there are two Special Needs SERVE sites that incorporate planning and support in addition to the typical SERVE template. SERVE Winnipeg, a special needs site, will host up to 20 youth with disabilities and the same number of peer mentors. Peer mentors provide the necessary supports to the youth with disabilities and provide opportunities for friendships to develop. It is a beautiful picture!

The on-site host team helps peer mentors learn to engage in authentic relationships that are mutual so that they do things with others as opposed to for others. A SERVE session begins with terms like “mentor” and “participant,” communicating clear differences. By the end of the week, people refer to each other with terms like “friend” and “buddy,” communicating clear similarities—all equal and created for service. SERVE flips a common picture of disability, allowing participants to see that everyone, regardless of ability, has gifts and abilities that contribute to the building of the body of Christ. Being a mentor is a SERVE within a SERVE!

Because many youth with disabilities never have the opportunity to participate in a mission trip experience, I love the joy that the participants share when they are challenged to live out their faith in a SERVE experience—to be the hands and feet of Christ.

SERVE also helps leaders grow in their ability to be vulnerable. They learn to worship without abandon—to be free to express their faith in new ways (see [www.servewinnipeg.com](http://www.servewinnipeg.com) for more information).

## **More Online**

More camping articles are available online ([www.crcna.org/disability](http://www.crcna.org/disability) and [www.rca.org/disability](http://www.rca.org/disability)), including:

- An initially reluctant Camp Fowler camper with a disability now aspires to be an assistant counselor, and tofu potpie is part of the dinner rotation at her home.
- Countryside Camp leaves lasting impressions on campers with disabilities and the vocations of their counselors.

## **Editor's Note**

### **A Retreat to Remember**

From the moment we pulled up to the gate until the end of our Joni and Friends Family Retreat, people anticipated our needs before we expressed them. At arrival, each family was asked, “Do you want a quiet welcome or a noisy one?”

The noisy welcome was just right for our daughter Nicole, who has multiple disabilities, and for our other children. But I heard that one mom was so touched by this question that she started crying. The quiet welcome was just right

for her child with autism. Perhaps no one had ever considered her child's needs in this way before.

The mood of that happy beginning continued throughout the days of the retreat. Because parents needed to know that their children would be safe and happy, an army of “short-term missionaries” engaged children and youth in meaningful, age- and ability-appropriate activities. Like all campers with disabilities, our daughter Nicole had an assistant who interacted with her whenever she was not with us.

Special sessions including workshops, physical activities, and a candlelight dinner refreshed parents.

Families living with disability feel different, even odd, compared to others. We feel like we can't talk about our experiences because we worry that others will not understand. Coming to a family retreat felt a bit like coming home, even though most were strangers to each other when we arrived.

Churches can make sure that each person and family affected by disability knows that they are welcome, that they belong, that others care about their lives and experiences and challenges.

People with disabilities often feel as if they have been pushed to the edges. Your church can do the opposite.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if people at your church anticipated the needs of families affected by disability? Wouldn't it be wonderful if some mom at your church started crying because she felt that her child and family were understood and welcomed?

—Mark Stephenson

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