

Rotary clubs lend a hand at camp for adults, kids with special needs

By ALEX PARKER-MAGYAR CONTRIBUTING WRITER | Posted: Tuesday, August 19, 2014 3:30 am

The Denville Sunrise Rotary Club and Dover Rotary Club sponsored activities at the annual Service Club Day carnival at Camp Merry Heart in Hackettstown, a sleep away and day camp for children and adults with special needs.

Easter Seals New Jersey and Rotary Club District 7470 teamed up on Wednesday, Aug. 6 to sponsor the event.

Campers were treated to cotton candy, popcorn, carnival games, prizes, an inflatable bounce house, and music from a DJ on the sunny afternoon. Each activity was sponsored by a local Rotary Club.

Officials from Easter Seals, a nonprofit group dedicated to the support of children and adults with disabilities, said Service Club Day is a way to recognize the donors to Camp Merry Heart while providing a fun day for the campers.

Chief Advancement Officer Helen Drobnis of Old Bridge is in charge of fundraising and marketing for the camp.

“There is nothing that can happen here without the donors,” said Drobnis. “We want to show them what they’re supporting.”

Whether it be the dining hall, the cabins, the rope course, or the boat house, one would be hard-pressed to find a structure on the grounds without a plaque commemorating a Rotary Club for funding it.

The relationship between Easter Seals and Rotary goes back to the birth of the organizations, as Rotary Club Founder Paul Harris and Easter Seals Founder Edgar Allen were close friends, Drobnis said. Allen himself was a founding member of the Rotary Club, and founded Easter Seals 14 years later in 1919.

The link between the groups remains strong nearly a century later, as was evidenced by the enthusiastic Rotarians at the carnival.



Merry Campers

From left are Camp Merry Heart counselor April Brooks of Wales, campers Brianna and Courtney, and counselor Kelly McKinney of Ireland.

Activities included a target practice game sponsored by the Hackettstown Rotary Club and a Plinko game sponsored by Denville Sunrise Rotary. All games were wheelchair-accessible.

According to Pia Reich of the Denville club, no matter where the chip ended up on the Plinko board, the camper would receive a prize.

“We want everybody to win every time,” said Reich. “It’s fun to get to know [the Merry Heart campers]. You don’t often get to become part of their world.”

Several Rotary Clubs provided refreshments for the campers. The Rotary Club of Dover offered iced tea, while water and popcorn were provided by Rockaway Rotary.

The inflatable bounce house, which has become a staple of the carnival, was provided by the Rotary Club of The Caldwells.

Visitors came from farther away than Essex County, however, as a number of Rotarians from District 2670 of Shikoku, Japan were present for the fair. Districts 7470 and 2670 are sister districts, and have held a student exchange program for years.

The Shikoku district is the donor of a garden on the Merry Heart grounds.

Bob Markman of Rotary Club of the Caldwells is the District Service Chair and coordinator of the event. Markman said that for him, the carnival should serve as a reminder to visitors: “Don’t sweat the small stuff.

“You see the smiles on the kids’ faces, it could melt steel,” Markman said.

“You see the love, the happiness – it really puts all your complaints in perspective. It makes you feel good. Why get involved? Because it helps people and it makes you feel good.”

Once the carnival festivities had winded down, Rotarians from Roxbury, Whippany, and Morristown served up a barbecue dinner for all in attendance. Former District Governor Barry Kroll of the Madison club was in attendance as was the current District Governor Larry Ripley of Morris Plains.

This summer marks Camp Merry Heart’s 60th year, according to Drobnis, who said many campers specifically register for the camp session of the Service Club Day carnival.

Drobnis said the camp schedules a range of special activities for the campers. These include lessons from a live DJ on how to scratch and spin records on the night of the carnival, and a performance from D2W Professional Wrestling on Saturday night.

Significantly, Drobnis explained the camp seeks to offer regular camp activities to the Merry Heart campers, like archery, fishing, canoeing, swimming, campouts, ball sports, and dances.

All activities are adapted to the respective capabilities of the campers.

“It’s fun. They do all the regular summer camp stuff,” said Drobnis, who has worked at the camp for 18 years. “The campers have a great time, make friends, and just be themselves.”

Drobnis added the sleep-away camp can be a welcome respite for the parents or caretakers of children and adults with special needs.

The camp offers year-round programs, including trips to places such as Philadelphia, Six Flags Great Adventure, and New York City to see the Rockettes at Radio City Music Hall.

The programs and the maintenance of the camp’s facilities are impossible without funds from donors, Drobnis said.

“Without the donors we can’t have what we have here,” said Drobnis. “The campers age here, they have friends here they visit every summer. Corporate donors and the Rotary Club make it all possible.”

For information about Camp Merry Heart, call (908) 852-3896. For information about Easter Seals New Jersey, or to make a donation, visit easterseals.com/nj.