

Fresh Air Fund 2019: Camp Merry Heart brings summer fun to those with special needs

Posted Jul 7, 2019



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A camper and camp counselor enjoy time on the water at Camp Merry Heart in Hackettstown.

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By [Community Bulletin](#)

Since 1882, the mission of the Greater Newark Fresh Air Fund — organized by the Female Charitable Society and now run by the Newark Day Center — has been to provide camping experiences for inner-city children from the Newark area.

And, the camp opportunities are for children of all abilities. For children with special physical and neurological needs, the Fresh Air Fund utilizes Camp Merry Heart and Camp Hope.

“The Fresh Air Fund has worked with these camps for over 30 years,” said Donna Johnson-Thompson, executive director of the Newark Day Center. Johnson-Thompson said the camp experiences that these facilities provide are second to none.

The Fresh Air Fund receives applications for summer scholarships for children with special needs and they are referred directly to the camps that can accommodate their needs. The Fresh Air Fund also assists by providing funds to families that may need assistance. During last year’s camping season, the Fresh Air Fund assisted 19 campers who were served by the two camps.

Camp Profile: Camp Merry Heart

“I have visited Camp Merry Heart where I saw happy campers enjoying the pleasures of attending summer camp,” Johnson-Thompson said. She continued, “I witnessed remarkable counselors pushing wheelchairs through hiking trails, campers participating in swimming, arts and crafts, singing and sports activities. I had the opportunity to sit down with the campers and enjoy a nutritious and delicious lunch. If you did not see the wheelchairs, leg braces, or canes for the blind, you would believe that you are at a typical summer camp for children.”

The Camp Merry Heart is a 123-acre, fully accessible camp in Hackettstown. The camp provides activities intended to encourage inclusion and bring campers together in a way that promotes personal growth and accomplishment. There are options for weekend, one-week and two-week sessions.

According to Easterseals New Jersey, which operates the facility, “It’s a time for campers to bolster their self-esteem and independence while having fun. This allows caregivers to take some time for themselves while knowing their loved one is both safe and making memories that will last a lifetime.”

Camp Merry Heart activities include swimming, fishing, boating, splash pad, games, biking, hiking, challenge courses, zip lining, arts and crafts, gardening, team sports, rock climbing, karaoke, dancing and talent shows.

[Camp Merry Heart, located on 123 acres in Hackettstown, includes plenty of paved pathways through wooded areas.](#)

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A Camp Counselor's Perspective

"I spent my first summer at Camp Merry Heart in 2016 as a camp counselor," said Beth Sargeson, a 19-year-old from Derbyshire, England.

Sargeson continued, "Out of all things I could do with my free time (vacation, party, etc.), I'm going back to camp this year. Why? I'll tell you. If you've ever attended a summer camp, Easterseals Camp Merry Heart will be a familiar sight. You'll find it has all the same amenities: cabins, a dining hall, forest trails, a lake... but if you take a closer look, you'll spot some differences. There's a ramp that leads into almost every building, unique lifts line the pool for taking campers in and out of the water, and the campers receive an extra bit of assistance from staff to participate in activities. That's because Camp Merry Heart is designed to be fully accessible for campers with disabilities and special needs... and it's incredible.

"When I first decided to apply for a position at camp, it was because I wanted to make a difference in someone's life. After reading up on the camp, I knew this was my chance to help make this a summer the campers with disabilities would always remember. Before I started, I'd had little to no experience, but the training I received was amazing, giving me everything I needed to become the best counselor possible.

"Every day was a new adventure, filled with different obstacles and exciting new challenges to explore. Each day went by so fast it felt like, in a blink of an eye, my summer had ended. It was an experience I wouldn't soon forget and I knew I'd be back. I HAD to go back.

"I will never forget Camp Merry Heart's campers. I return year after year for the lessons they teach me, the uncontrollable laughter, and the endless amounts of love shared from those I now call friends. When the campers go home, the emotion builds, and tears are shed as you wave them off down the driveway. The tears are worth the memories that make the goodbyes so hard.

“Camp is a place you can be yourself - no judgement, no discrimination, and equality for everyone in all the 123 acres of camp. Not one person at camp is the same, and that’s what makes it such an amazing place to spend three months of my summer.

“The people I worked alongside became my backbone. You start at the beginning of summer not knowing anybody, but by the end; you’re a family. Veteran counselors will tell you, ‘Once you’ve done your first year at camp, you get “hooked”,’ and from my experience, I can 100 percent agree.

“Friends and family would ask, ‘You’ve done camp, why go back? Why not somewhere new?’ It’s near impossible to put into one article the reasons that I’m going into my third summer at the same camp, but if you round everything into one, it all comes down to love. I love camp, and I love the people I work with. Camp is now a part of me and I honestly don’t remember who I was before, but all I can say is I love who camp made me.”

For more information on Camp Merry Heart, go to eastersealsnj.org.

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