

Camp Sunshine sets sights on endowment

BY GINA VERGEL
Staff Writer

Walking into Camp Sunshine on what was forecasted to be a rainy day, one encounters towel-wrapped campers and counselors sitting around tables, joking around or just bopping to Kelly Clarkson's latest hit. It's a fun scene and one would never have guessed that the skies had darkened and the campers had to sit inside and wait until it was time to go home.

The camp, which was created by a group of parents in the early sixties so that their disabled children would have a place for fun and recreation year round, celebrated its 45th anniversary last summer. It is the hope of parents, like Ridgewood resident Mary Jane Clark, that the camp's management, staff and campers continue to celebrate anniversaries for many years to come.

For Clark, the camp is a lifesaver, and not just for her, but also for her 16-year-old son, who is disabled.

"He loves it. It's the only thing he does week in and week out," she said.

As an involved parent who stays active in fundraising for the camp, she says that a few years down the line, the camp will need an endowment to continue to open its doors. Calling the fees charged to parents "generous," Clark said fundraising is important.

"I expect that it will take four or five years to raise the type of mon-



GARY JUNG/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Campers and counselors at Camp Sunshine in Paramus enjoying another fun filled day at the 45-year old camp. Director Joe Nuzzo, (in baseball cap), worked at the camp as a youngster and now manages to study law while managing the camp.

ey that we need," she said, adding that she is constantly taken aback at the generosity and kindness of the camp's volunteers. "It restores your faith in mankind," she said.

Joe Nuzzo, 28, is the camp's director. Nuzzo's parents started working at the camp in the late sixties, he explained. "My sister was a camper there

but they got involved before she started going because the camp was involved with the place where she was getting therapy," he said. Nuzzo explained that the

camp's fees do not even make up half of the yearly budget. Parents, he said, are an inspiring source because they are tenacious with their fundraising efforts.

"It gets harder and harder every year, though. With costs rising ... insurance, gas and all that stuff it seems like it's going through the roof," he said.

Together with parents and volunteers, Nuzzo decided that it would be a good opportunity and goal to have a long-term endowment in place by the camp's 50th anniversary.

"That would ensure that the program is there for future generations," he said.

A law student at Seton Hall by morning, noon and night, Nuzzo somehow finds time to run the camp, which offers swimming as its biggest activity. Back in the camps early days, campers would swim in an above ground pool, which parents would erect and take down by the end of the summer. Its people like that, Nuzzo said, that help the camp run smoothly.

Like Frank, a former Bergen County Parks employee that still comes in twice a week to run the grill for the camp barbecues. Frank used to volunteer his lunch hour to be the chef before he retired.

And the campers, said Nuzzo, just love it. They swim, play in the park, take field trips and even practice basic computer skills.

"It's a proven formula that they

need peer interaction. It's what they don't normally get at home or at school. Plus they're getting to interact with non-disabled kids, like the counselors," he said.

The camp's counselors are perhaps the most important relationship fostered throughout each summer. The mostly teenaged volunteers usually find Camp Sunshine as part of school community service, or as part of their Confirmation or Bar Mitzvah requirements.

"They come in intending to work 20 hours and then they stay because they have a good time and feel good doing it. But they can't stay forever and that's why we can always use more volunteers," said Nuzzo.

For now, Camp Sunshine is running safely. It will be able to keep providing activities for 45 campers this July and August. As for the camp's future, parents, volunteers and friends will continue to work on educating the public about the service that the camp provides for disabled children and teenagers year round.

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Joe Nuzzo
Director, Camp Sunshine

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Camp Sunshine is located at the Ridgewood Duck Pond on East Ridgewood Avenue. For information about volunteering or making a donation, call 201 652-1755.