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Teen mentors give special kids a chance to go to camp

By Rob Rogers
Marin Independent Journal

Posted: 07/23/2011 09:00:00 PM PDT

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DURING THE SCHOOL YEAR, Alex and Ben are students at Star Academy, a school for children with special needs in San Rafael.



For the last week, however, they've been "Alex the Goat" and "Ben the Hen" — two campers taking part in the games, explorations and other activities at Muir Beach's Slide Ranch.

Under ordinary circumstances, the staff at Slide Ranch might find it difficult to provide the kind of close attention Alex and Ben require. But they've been able to attend camp — Ben for the second year in a row — thanks to the efforts of 18-year-old Ethan Fraser, a volunteer with the SummerAde program.

"I really like making connections with them," said Fraser, a senior at the Branson School who crosses the Golden Gate Bridge each morning from his home in San Francisco to take part in the program.

"I went to camp with Ben last year. His parents asked if I would go again this year — and said his friend Alex wanted to come," said Fraser, who added that the experience was helpful for him in part "because I want to be a doctor.

"But really," he added, "I just like working with kids."

SummerAde, the brainchild of Corte Madera pediatrician Tina Gabby, will give at least 20 special needs children the opportunity to attend camp this summer by matching them with a teenage mentor.

"A lot of the children we work with need help with social skills, and facilitating social interactions,"

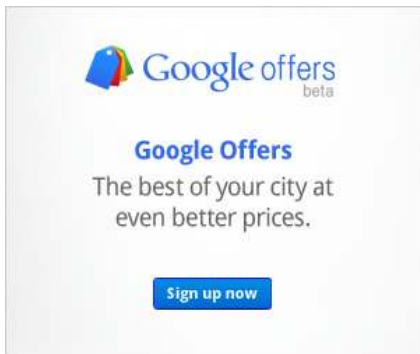
Gabby said. "They tend to be more isolated and play alone. They may have trouble following directions. They're children who could be in the mainstream, but (without SummerAde) they could not otherwise go to camp."

Gabby said she was inspired to create the program, now in its third year, after talking with many of the parents of her patients.

"Once school is out, those students have nowhere to go, and that often puts a burden on parents," she said.

Gabby worked with her son, Gabriel Moynihan, and her niece, Julia Black, to launch the organization. Moynihan now acts as a recruiter and matchmaker, sifting through

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the e-mailed applications of would-be mentors and pairing them with children who need their support.

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"I went to camp a week ago with a boy who had Down syndrome," said Moynihan, a senior at the Branson School. "I was able to get him involved with all the camp's activities. He didn't want to, at first — he wanted to do his own thing. But I kept him involved and engaged."

Those teenaged volunteers then meet with the special needs students and their parents before camp to make sure the relationship is a good fit, Gabby said. Occasionally there's a mismatch — but in most cases, the two hit it off right away.

"All of the other campers want to know why I'm there," Moynihan said. "I tell them that I'm (the camper's) friend. I've been working with younger kids since I was 10 years old, and I feel it's very rewarding."

Gabby, for her part, works with camps throughout Marin — including Slide Ranch and the summer programs operated by the parks and recreation departments of Belvedere, Corte Madera, Larkspur and Mill Valley — to find the best placements for SummerAde's campers.

At Camp EdTech, for example, held at Larkspur's Hall Middle School, 13-year-old Lauren worked to create a stop-motion animated film with a group of other campers — and the help of her SummerAde mentor, Maya.

Lauren is pleased with the film she made, and with the outdoor activities taking place at the camp. But mostly, "I like hanging out here," she said.

At Slide Ranch, Alex peppers group leader Cate Flanagan with a steady barrage of questions — but pauses briefly to say how much he enjoyed working in the camp's garden, and how much he likes the ranch's resident goats.

"I liked going to see all the animals," Ben agreed. "We had a good time with the chickens."

Gabby, for her part, would like to see SummerAde continue to grow — but worries that coordinating the program's placements could become a full-time occupation.

"We have the potential to grow greatly, but it's limited by my time and the teenagers' time," Gabby said. "We're planning to apply for 501-C3 (nonprofit) status and raise some money so that we can hire somebody and serve more kids."

For more information about the program, visit www.summerade.org.

Contact Rob Rogers via email at rogers@marinij.com

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Elizabeth Brown

Hey, my daughter plays baseball and soccer with Ben and my typical son was in camp last week with these boys. I would love to send my daughter to mainstream camp with a helper as well as have my 'typical' kids be helpers when they are old enough! great idea!

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PUBLISHED ON 9/25/2011

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