

Trees as tools? Bush lot turns into learning camp

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Audrey Joynt, left, Ben Bourgeois, Tina Varvaresos, James McCallum and Grace Bourgeois assist with pruning at the Richmond Road camp for special needs youth.

EMC News - A forested property in the small community of Fallowfield has seen a lot of activity in recent weeks, as members of a day camp for youth with developmental disorders have taken over land to transform it into a useable space.

The Outdoor Work Experience Summer Day Camp just wrapped up its second year helping youth living with autism, Down's Syndrome and other disorders learn work and socialization skills while enjoying nature.

The brainchild of Kathleen Rooney, the camp recruits teen volunteers to serve as role models and educators. Called workers, the teens are students at local high schools in Barrhaven and Kanata who volunteer their time to guide the workers in training through their tasks.

In this case, that task is to turn an unoccupied bush lot into a functional space. Underneath the foliage of the remaining trees, the youth perform the basic physical labour needed for all types of outdoor work - carrying tree limbs, pruning, painting, digging - tasks in this case designed to teach through repetition.

"It gives them a chance to practice for work at home, helping out with chores, giving them experience," said Rooney, adding the ultimate goal is to build independence and a sense of responsibility in the youth.

"We want them to feel a sense of accomplishment, because it's something they don't often get a chance to feel."

While the number of youth living with developmental disorders is growing, finding programs to benefit their child's growth is still hard for parents. As a long-time privately practicing special needs educator, Rooney saw the need for a half-day camp like hers.

Assisting her in the endeavor are two special needs workers - supervisors in camp-speak - who spend much more time encouraging the youth than stepping in to take charge. That only happens if there is a safety issue.

Supervisors Meaghan Samuel and Lindsay Shaver are there to see the kids develop their newfound independence.

"We try not to step in," said Samuels. "It's all about encouraging them to develop perseverance - working hard and following through with a job gives them a sense of accomplishment."

An assessment performed by a University of Ottawa professor following last year's camp revealed a positive effect on the participating youth.

"We had good feedback from both the workers in training and their parents," said Rooney. "A lot of them are doing quite well - the parents have noticed a change, especially in their self-confidence."

The effects of the socializing and camaraderie experienced at the camp could be seen on the faces of the workers in training as they purposefully went about their work.

Jaimie Green's impressive strength proved to be an asset to the group, as such, the enthusiastic teen described his favourite responsibility as "lifting, and getting the big logs." Green's adjective of choice - fantabulous - was being used in abundance over the course of the camp, positive feedback for sure for organizers.

Dan Taylor, another worker in training, joined most Ottawans in finding the heat and humidity oppressive, but that wasn't enough to dampen the positives of the experience.

"At the end of the day it's very gratifying," he said.

As with most private ventures, donations from sponsors are crucial to a successful operation. Rooney is very thankful for the host of businesses and organizations who have helped her achieve her goals for the youth.

The South Nepean Autism Centre is a returning sponsor from last year, providing the camp with advertising and financing. Local supporters include Bridlewood Home Hardware, FreshCo in Bells Corners, Ross' Independent Grocer in Barrhaven, Canadian Tire, Shoppers' Drug Mart, Home Depot, Giant Tiger, Farm Boy, and many others.

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