

Youngsters put their muscles into summer camp program



Hard at work. Jamie Green, Kris Kristjansson, James McCallum and Sam Balice put some muscle into their clean up of a bush lot, part of a summer camp to help kids learn skills and get a sense of accomplishment. *Submitted photo*

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FALLOWFIELD - Dan picks up an old branch, gives it a quick look, then reaches down and snips off an end with a large set of pruning shears. He picks up the new twig and drops it in a plastic box. A look inside the box shows all the twigs fit almost perfectly, reaching from one side of the container to the other as if trimmed using a ruler.

Such is Dan's need for order and symmetry.

"I piled some wood too," Dan says, pointing towards four huge piles of fire wood, all neat and orderly, all braced between trees to keep the piles solid.

The 16-year-old is one of more than a dozen children with developmental challenges learning outdoor work skills in a bush lot owned by Kathleen and Pat Rooney.

Outdoor Work Experience Summer Day Camp is offering its second season of the unique camp on Richmond Road, just south of Bridlewood.

Kathleen says the skills the kids learn help develop such critical life skills as independence, responsibility and altruism.

Despite growing numbers of youth between 12 and 22 with pervasive developmental disorders, autism, Down syndrome and other challenges, programs for these older children are scarce. Kathleen says waiting lists can stretch to 15 years and the government offers minimal financial support. She provides the example of one Ottawa family whose annual program costs for a 12-

year-old child with special needs matched expenses to send their older son to university for the same year.

Outdoor Work Experience Summer Day Camp has received substantial financial support from the community to help offset camp costs for families that already spend heavily throughout the year for their child's special services, particularly the South Nepean Autism Centre.

TRANSFERABLE SKILLS

Kathleen, an educator with 22 years experience operating a private practice servicing special needs youth, designed the half-day summer camp last year. The program teaches common outdoor work skills such as raking, pruning, clipping grass, painting fences, digging and shovelling, potting seeds and plants, tending plants and trees, as well as appropriate work behaviour and acceptable conversation skills for the work place. Most importantly, the transfer of these skills to the home and community is encouraged.

James, 23, is a good example. He says he enjoys working with the logs and the trees.

"They're fun," he says, adding that pruning trees is his favourite activity, and he's also tried painting and raking.

Kathleen says that after James took part in last summer's inaugural camp, he went home and started helping around the house with vacuuming, doing laundry and washing dishes.

"He helps his mom so much she said she couldn't do without him," Kathleen says.

Twenty-one-year-old Jeremy is also in the camp for the second year, and couldn't name an individual task as his favourite, but was digging when a reporter arrived at the bush lot.

"I love giving back to the environment," he said. "I like to clean up the planet."

Typical teenagers are also an essential component of the summer day camp, working as volunteers with the campers. They too are receiving a hands-on education while understanding and interacting with special needs youth. These typical teens are the role models for appropriate work behaviour and conversation as well as responsible for motivation and enthusiasm that is necessary in the work place.

Ben O'Neil, a 14-year-old volunteer who attends Mother Teresa High School in Barrhaven, said he's enjoying work outside and interacting with the campers.

"It's inspiring and eye-opening." Ben says during a short break, adding he's sure to volunteer again next year. "I see how it's making a difference."

Supervisor Meaghan Samuel is a University of Ottawa student. She says some campers are shy or avoid socializing when they first arrive, but she's seen that change as the weeks go on.

“It’s great when they all come together on break,” Samuel says. “They’re all sitting and laughing and talking.”

Kathleen says for many of the participants this is their first experience actually performing physical labour, and the campers feel they’ve achieved something important when they see how the overgrown bush lot is groomed and cleaned up when they’re finished.

As with the typical population, some like the physical work more than others, but all make progress in determining their strengths and weaknesses, and likes and dislikes.

She says some have managed to obtain part-time casual employment in their community.

By the end of the morning, parents and caregivers are arriving to pick up the campers. Samuel says she feels a real sense of accomplishment when work wraps up at noon.

“I don’t want to leave,” Samuel says. “At the end of the day I feel like I’ve made new friends and I go home feeling like I’ve changed something and changed myself too.”

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