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Florida Lions Camp calls it a summer

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On July 23, the final day of the year's final Florida Lions Camp session, one of the first things Dade City Heritage Park Lions Club President Shirley LePage saw was a crying child.

"I saw a little boy hugging his mother and crying, saying, 'I don't want to go home.'" said LePage, smiling.

The Dade City Lions sent three children to the camp this year at Lake Wales, which is geared toward children with special needs. Some have vision or hearing challenges, others use wheelchairs, some are autistic or have medical problems. For a week, they join their siblings and other children in a good old-fashioned summer camp experience.

"We take all the kids who wouldn't fit in at another camp because they don't have our staff ratio, 2-to-1," said Barbara Cage, executive director of Florida Lions Camp. "We have everything you'd see at a typical camp. We just do it differently."

The camp features a 25-yard swimming pool with patio areas for cookouts, fishing and picnic areas.

"We make sure we know about any food allergies the kids have and have lifeguards on duty at all times," said camp counselor Michael Kingman. "It's all about being safe and having fun."

Also featured at the camp are arts-and-craft halls and sports courts with equipment adapted for special needs children.

"We have adapted basketballs that make noise when they shoot, books in Braille, and crafts that the kids shape," Kingman said. "Crafts that they can feel using their touch and sensory abilities."

Music and parties are other components of the camp experience, and each weeklong session culminates with an awards ceremony-talent show with kids being honored for camp achievements and showcasing their singing, dancing and poetry for counselors and staff as well parents and siblings.

Among those gathered for the show on July 23 were Mike and Angela Woosley of Wesley Chapel, whose daughter Amber attended the camp and was featured in the talent show. Amber attended the camp with help from the Dade City Heritage Park Lions.

"I love this place," said Angela Woosley, who has another daughter, Makayla, and a son, Aaron. "The staff is wonderful, very well-trained to handle anything. And if it wasn't for Heritage Park, Amber wouldn't have gotten to come. She seems happy."

Also happy was Deanna St. Amour of Lutz, who sent three children to camp this year.

"The value of the camp for the kids is that they get to meet other kids with atypical siblings," she said. "What parents of special needs children take away is a week where they don't have to worry about their kids' safety."

St. Amour's two sons, Jackson and Justin, both plan to serve as counselors at next year's Florida Lions Camp. Her daughter, Zoe, attended this year's camp.

"Any way I can help is great," said Jackson Pentith. "This camp is a great experience. They help a lot of people."

His brother, Justin, agrees.

"After attending this camp, it's now my dream to become a therapist," said Justin, 11. "For kids who are disabled, this is the place where everybody accepts what they're doing."

"This is the summer when they can be themselves," said Liz Cage, program director at Florida Lions Camp.

Camp counselors also benefit from the Florida Lions Camp experience, said Kirsty Williams, who came from England to work at the camp.

"After working at this camp, I've chosen my career path. I'm going to become a social worker," said Williams, 22. "What the kids take home is acceptance."

Camp counselor Jamie-Lee James, also from England, thinks that "special needs kids get so much out of this experience. To see how much they progress makes it all worthwhile."

Counselor Clayton Annandale of South Africa said, "This camp builds their abilities and better their lives."

Longtime Lions camper Brooks Lamkin showed his appreciation for the camp in a variety of ways this year. With the help of his family, who runs the Isle of Capri bar in Lakeland, he raised \$3,500 to donate to the camp and support its operation. And he composed and performed a song for this year's talent show that literally sings the praise of the Florida Lions Camp.

"I've been coming here for seven years," he said. "The camp has made me more responsible. It's made me grow up. Every year here I grow, develop and change."

WHAT'S IT ALL ABOUT?

SOME BACKGROUND: Supported by the Lions Club, the Florida Lions Camp is an inclusive summer camp that offers traditional camp activities for children of varying abilities. In Lake Wales, the camp is done in 10 one-week sessions throughout the summer, with an approximate capacity of about 40 campers a session.

COMMUNITY CONTRIBUTIONS: The Florida Lions Camp, according to its website, www.lionscampfl.org/, "is a private no-profit, inclusive camp established and dedicated to serving the needs of youth of varying ability levels, and adults with physical and developmental challenges."

A LITTLE HISTORY: The Florida Lions Camp, according to the website, "began operation in 1974. The camp is considered to be one of the leading inclusive facilities of this type in the United States."

The camp is for people 5 or older, the website states. "Our goal is to offer recreational/leisure opportunities for our campers through a diversity of experiences that allows our campers to play, learn and grow together regardless of their ability levels or challenges."

GET INVOLVED: The Florida Lions Camp depends on community donations to offer a full range of services to campers. Those who want to help can go to www.lionscampfl.org/get_involved.html for information.