

Day at the Beach

Kids enjoy day in the sun

Ocean County Observer
August 8, 2007

BY ANGELA SANTORIELLO
STAFF WRITER

ISLAND BEACH STATE PARK — Cyndy O'Connell sat on the sands with the wind blowing in her hair and the sun shining on her skin.

But the 14-year-old Howell resident, who has cerebral palsy, was not sitting in a beach blanket. Rather, she was propped up in a beach wheelchair yesterday afternoon at The Family Resource Network and Epilepsy Foundation of New Jersey's Day at the Beach.

Cyndy's mother, Denise, said the isolated setting in front of the governor's beach house provides a place where families with loved ones who have disabilities can gather without the worries of prejudice.

"I think it is fantastic," said Denise while her sons John, 8, and Mason, 3, were building a sandcastle while she stood close to her daughter. "It's nice to be around other parents that are dealing with what you are even if it is not on the same lines."

Jessica Barzilay, assistant director of The Family Resource Network, said families with loved ones who suffer from epilepsy, autism, mental retardation, spinal bifida, traumatic brain injury and cerebral palsy are invited to the annual event.

"They wait for this all year long. We always get someone every year who has never been to the beach before," said Barzilay of the families who come from all over the state for a Day at the Beach. "We have special wheelchairs for them to go in the water and that is not something everyone can do without the chairs."

Like O'Connell, Barzilay noted how appreciative the families are to have an afternoon free of onlookers.

"It's a day that these families can be together without worrying about people staring at them. They can just relax," she said.

Cyndy's family mentor, Marlene West, of Howell, came out to spend time with the O'Connell family, who she visits once a week for two hours assisting in any way she can. "She is an angel sent from heaven," said Denise of West, who watched Cyndy closely yesterday, walking over to her wheelchair periodically to prop her up.

"This is an incredible day for the entire family and a wonderful thing for me as well," said West. "They will be taking Cyndy in the water and she will thoroughly enjoy that."

While Cyndy sat smiling silently in her wheelchair since she is non-verbal, Xander Ninivaggi, 14, laughed loudly while splashing in the ocean.

Xander's mother, Cynthia, watched her autistic son run in the wave's foam, saying she too enjoys being surrounded by other parents who are going through the same trials.

"It's a really accepting atmosphere," she said, adding, "It's so nice to be around others who have a loved one with a disability because everyone understands."

Ninivaggi said as a Toms River resident, it would be nice to see more organizations support events for families like hers. "We need more recreational opportunities to include disabled children," she said.



DOUG HOOD PHOTO

Kayla Murphy, 13, left, swims with friends Xander and Steve Ninivaggi, all of Toms River, at the Epilepsy Foundation of New Jersey's Day at the Beach yesterday.

Brendan Connelly, 20, of Harrington Park, was an epileptic child, but has been seizure free for the last 18 years and came down from North Jersey to volunteer for the day. "I love the beach and it is a great day for the kids, some of which have never even been to the beach before," he said. "It makes me feel good to make them feel good."

Brendan's father, Pat, said he turned to the Epilepsy Foundation of New Jersey when his son was a child. "We are so grateful to them for giving us direction when we had no idea what to do," said Pat Connelly.

The next Family Resource Network event in coordination with Autism Family Services of New Jersey is the Beach Bash 2007 on Sept. 9. "A professional surfer had a son who was autistic and when he took him out on a surfboard he saw how healing it was for him," said Barzilay. "Now they do surf camps with up to 165 kids who get a chance to surf."

Barzilay said a Day at the Beach and the Beach Bash 2007 proves "anything is possible" for those with disabilities.

To register for the Beach Bash, call (877) 237-4477 or visit www surfershealing.org.