

Apple Acres . . . Where Love Just Grows and Grows

by Maggie Beyer

It's down the road about 1000 North, just east of Chesterton. From the windows of the main lodge you can hear the razz-a-ma-tazz of upbeat music and lots of laughter. Under a spreading old apple tree, there's a group of people, busy coloring rainbows, reaching for favorite crayons, having lots of fun. All of them, campers and counselors alike, are living out their camp's theme: "Be the Best That You Can Be."

Sometimes it isn't easy for this particular group. They are all handicapped - mentally or physically - sometimes both. They are all Father Dennis Blaney's special people, able to enjoy a week of summer fun, because he has gathered around him a special group of people. They are people who come to help run and staff the camp, people who care enough to want to make a difference, if only for a little while.

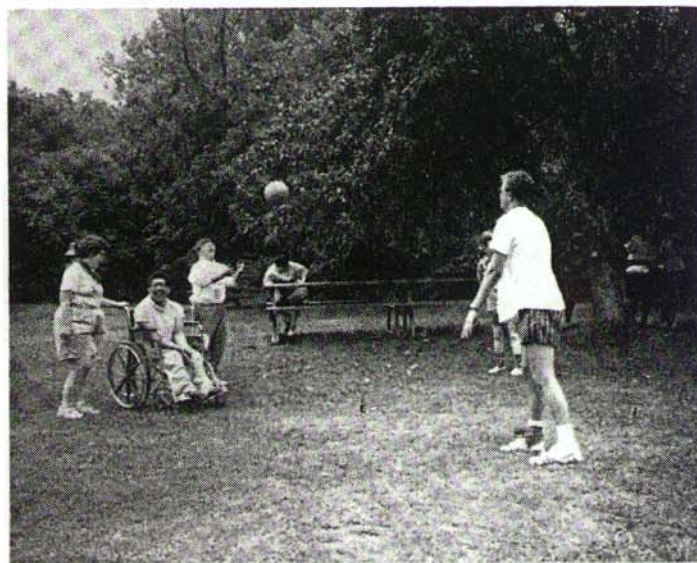


Kathy and friends under the trees.

Beacher Kim Krueger, camp director, showed me around. I tried to. There were so many claims for her attention. There was so much going on everywhere. The craft class under the tree had broken up to begin a high volume allgame: different strokes for different folks. Some could manage to volley a ball or stand-up to a pitch; others could only toss a ball back and forth from a wheelchair. It didn't matter. They were all being the best that they could be.

In the lodge, the music had a lot going for it, including Jimmy Aldrin, Cindy and the gang. There was the beat of rhythm in the air as hands waved in time, dancers swayed and shuffled. Those with braces or in walkers were not excluded; they were just drawn in, part of the group, with everybody joining in, being the best that they could be. Paul Perrion was busy helping with a project at another table doors. Smells of good cooking filled the air as cooks prepared lunch. Beds lined a wall to switch into dormitory life at night. Outside, counselor Jack Potter ran some clothes and towels through the wringer washer. This was not Camp MuchoBucks in some posh resort. But no one cared. What they did care about was each other. It showed - in every word, in every hug.

The staff all agree that it's the love that keeps them going. No simpering about the word. They say it quite simply, and quite sincerely. But not just the love they give, it's the love they get. Kathy Wolf, from Shoreland Hills, calls it "the unconditional love that the disabled person gives to us." Kim says, "They are so loving and affectionate, you forget about the handicap. At the end of the week, we all cry when we say good-bye." Like Kim, Paul tried a week first as counselor last year, "not sure about it, because I had other things I wanted to do," he said. But he liked it so well, he is back this year for the entire season. Michigan City-ite Jack Potter, (he of the laundry and other things), plans his vacation from Nipsco to coincide with his yearly weeks at Apple Acres. Tammy and Cindy Melchor from the Hammond area are dance professionals with a troupe of disabled people who perform at parades and fairs.



Duff Kerger helps campers be the best ball players they can be.

Father Blaney's camp has grown into this year's four weeks over 15 years' time. It started just by getting a small group together at Sacred Heart rectory for a one-day sharing time. The group found so much goodness in getting together that like Topsy, the idea and reality of a camp just grew. Now, though they still have to turn people away each year (costs, you know), they lease the campsite from the Calumet Council of Girl Scouts, subsidize campers and operation through memberships in SHARE. The non-profit foundation holds a yearly "Friends" drive each Spring. That first mini-retreat has become a non-denominational week of camping for handicapped persons (18 to 80), drawing campers from all of Northwest Indiana, South Bend, Three Oaks, Michigan and even Chicago.

Campers often repeat each year, though applications must be filed and reviewed. That goes for volunteer staff as well, who must formally apply, with references. "It isn't for everybody," Kim said, "Though you soon forget they are handicapped." Like the campers they come from a wide area in surrounding counties. Alice the nurse, takes vaca-

Continued on page 26

tion time from her job at a Chicago hospital to spend her days at camp. Herb Fischer, one of the cooks, was recruited through a friend and told Father Blaney he didn't think he could handle one-on-one assistance. But he tried the cooking detail last year and is back for a repeat performance. Cooks Marie Boyd, Dick Hohenberger and Gretchen Corrazzo have been repeat performers for years.

Kim, recently graduated from Ball State, wanted to try camp counseling last year before going into full-time teaching. She volunteered for one week; came back for a second; then



Instructors help out with . . . dancing

a third. This year, she said yes to the job of camp director for the full four-week season. She will be starting her teaching job this fall, teaching social studies and language arts to 7th and 8th graders in Valparaiso. Her 8th grade homeroom will have 19 boys and 3 girls. (When they asked her, "Do you like to party?" she knew she was going to be in for a real challenge.)

Her most challenging task at Apple Acres has been "getting enough sleep," she said. The most rewarding part is the fellowship and friendship of the campers and counselors. "There is so much love out here," she said, "It's just amazing." (There's that word again.)



Making rainbows and other art outdoors

Amazing, too, is the amount of fun that can be crammed into a week of camping. Mornings have the dance and art projects with people like Maureen Salyer and Gwen Graf helping out. Afternoons might include a nature hike, scavenger hunt, blueberry picking, relay games (hot potato ball is a favorite.) There are trips to the beach, visits to local events such as the Dunes Summer Theatre's "Narnia."

Evenings are time for campfires, storytelling, and of course, lots of the usual giggle of games that campers everywhere play on their counselors. It is a week that many look forward to each year and start planning again as soon as they return to individual or group homes throughout LaPorte, Lake and Porter counties. P.A.F., Parents and Friends, and Dungravin are local referral sources. The year of waiting is worth it. As Kathy said, "The hardest part is saying goodbye each year. The best part is getting together again."

Kathy's own return is to her husband and four children, and a continuing teaching ministry for the disabled throughout the year. It takes a lot of Friends to help make up the complement of 15 to 18 counselors needed each year at Apple Acres. To name some others who have helped there was Terri Boyd, Charlie Mae Clay, Paul Gondeck, Brother Jim Hall, Duff Kerger, Betty Reid, Win Lusby, Jody Gawthrop, Michele Lorenzen, Erick Marks, Cheri Moffitt, Myssi Abshire, Danny Ochoa and Shawn Platt as well as many spur-of-the-moment volunteers like Kim's mother, Barb Kruger, who hauls and totes as needed.

The SHARE foundation welcomes other "Friends" to join them as new members at any time. There is lots of love to go around. I got my bit of take-home sugar when one

camper who had been sitting beside me, asked if I would like to have a rainbow, too.

Would I? She scurried to color one, the best she could do, just for me. Did I treasure it? Just guess. Apple Acres is a place apart - where everything and everyone gets brushed by the gift of love.



Indoor arts and crafts



Kim Krueger, Camp Director.