

Rick Leeson grabs the bottom of his white T-shirt with both hands. He yanks it up over the top of his head. He seems frozen as he sits in his wheelchair, shirt up, belly showing.

It is the loud rolling thunder that prompts Rick's rapid search for a hiding place. The sudden summer storm sends torrents of rain washing against the windows.

The sight of the tall man trying to climb up under his shirt causes his friends to laugh. Rick, 43, of Hebron is one of the 23 campers at a week-long retreat for adults with mental retardation and physical disabilities.

Louder thunder shakes the lodge. The uneasy feeling grows among the campers as they sit in a circle for a values lesson at the camp sponsored by Share Foundation of Michigan City.

Albert Fowler, 20, of South Bend, is popular on his first time at camp. He is known for his nearly chronic Michael Jackson imitation. The violent sounding weather makes him drop his feisty attitude. He looks scared as he sort of rolls up in a ball in his chair.

Some of the campers reach out beyond their own fears to offer comfort. "It's OK. It's OK. You're safe," they tell Rick and Albert, the two campers who seem to be the most afraid.

The storm brings a perfect opportunity for them to show what they are learning. "Reaching out in Friendship" is the theme for the camp that is for adults with mild to moderate mental retardation.

The six sessions of summer camp are one of several services Share Foundation offers on the 183 acres it owns near the Indiana Toll Road, between LaPorte and Rolling Prairie.

Rick's mother, Enid Leeson, of Crown Point, says a few days later that her son isn't usually scared of storms. Rick has brain damage that was caused by the encephalitis he had when he was 3 years old.

"He loves camp. He loves people. He's very sociable," Enid says. "He lives in a group home in Hebron. His father died a year ago. I wasn't afraid I couldn't take care of him. I was afraid something would happen to me, and he wouldn't be able to use the phone to help himself."

The storm hit as Kathleen Wolf, executive director of Share Foundation, was in the middle of a lesson about the value of friendship. Communicating, sharing and forgiving are keys to friendship, she says.

"People get hurt feelings. They call us names," Kathleen says. "They can say we tell the story too slow, we talk stupid, or something like that. We need to be able to forgive and not strike back in anger at someone who hurts us."

Albert, who soon is no longer concerned about the diminishing storm, says

he would demand an apology if someone pushed him or stepped on his foot.

"I would ask them to stop that. It hurts. Tell me you're sorry. I don't want to get my new shoes ruined," he says as Janet Wilson, 34 of Highland, gives him an adoring look.

"I reached out to Janet in friendship," Albert says. "I gave her the sticker she's wearing on her shirt."

But it's his dancing that seems to tie the bond between the quiet laughing woman in the wheelchair and the young man learning to put some soft edges to his attitude.

Albert rips around the meeting room. He tears off his jean jacket and twirls it. He mimics the highly energetic, prancing style of his idol. Michael Jackson music blares out of the stereo.

He dances in front of Janet. The brown-haired woman suddenly bursts out in equally energetic motion, even though she's still in her chair with the wheels locked.

Janet gazes up at Albert. He looks down at her with a tender expression on his face. She plants a wet kiss on his hand.

"You could get engaged here every day," Kathleen says with a laugh. She's working for the 11th year at the camp. "Sometimes several times a day. Sometimes to several people at the same time. I always warn my husband that I might come home engaged."

"I have great people to work with," she says. "This is not only a job. This is a work of love and affirmation. It's also a values retreat. We can look at who we are and where we're going. We can look at how we can be the person that God wanted us to be. I really have found my niche. I've experienced lots of personal growth."

The camp provides a nonjudgmental atmosphere in which the values of independence, self-esteem, spiritual growth and socialization are stressed.

The lodge and a few permanent housing units have been built on the rural property that's known as Sharing Meadows. Other housing units are planned.

Sharing Meadows is a dream come true for the Rev. Dennis Blaney, who has been helping adults with mental retardation

for about 30 years. He said he became interested in helping after parents told him about their concerns for their maturing children.

Blaney, who is retiring at the end of this month as the pastor of the Sacred Heart Roman Catholic Parish in Michigan City, is moving to a house being built at Sharing Meadows.

Paul Novotney, 38, formerly of Hammond, says people are the most important thing at camp. He has lived in one of the permanent housing units in Sharing Meadows since November 1994.

"I would be pretty sad if I worked hard all the time and didn't have any friends," says Paul, who later shows off his home, his garden and the trees he planted. Cabbage out of the garden is used to make cole slaw for lunch.

"I would be lonely," he says at the prospect of trying to celebrate a birthday party without any friends. "I would want somebody to sing to me. I would want somebody to sing 'Happy Birthday.'"

When campers in his group talk about other things that are difficult to do alone, Paul amuses himself. He is so vivid you can almost see the scene playing out in his head.

"Volleyball. You'd have to be fast," he says as he bends over laughing. "That really would be very hard to do. You'd have to hit the ball, run over there and hit it back, then run back around and hit it back to yourself."

Campers talk about their adventures on the previous day. They went to the beach and had a cookout in Michigan City. Even the cloudy, windy day didn't dim their spirits. The zoo gets the most raves.

They are excited as they talk about their favorite animals. They laugh at memories of seeing a peacock chasing a big animal. Kathleen says they like different animals because each camper is unique.

"The monkeys. I liked the monkeys best," says Carol Boissier, 48, of Highland. "The mother had a little baby. She was holding a little baby. I liked the way the mother monkey was holding the little baby."

Carol talks about schools she attended in Highland and her job. She is paid for assembling

and packaging kits for door springs. She works at the sheltered workshop that's run by the Lake County Association for the Retarded in Highland.

"I make a lot," she says of the number of springs she assembles. "Maybe 200 or 300. Something like that. I like to get my own money. I buy games. I have a lot. 'Sorry' is my favorite game."

It's not really work that's uppermost in Carol's mind today. She thinks of the monkeys again. The mother and the baby remind her of her deep sadness.

"I lost my Dad in 1978," she says. "I lost my Mom on June 22. It was this year. I was with my Mom. She was in the hospital. I was holding her hand. I said: 'Mom, I love you.' She said: 'I love you, too.' And then she died. That's the last thing she said."

"I'm living with my aunt. Her name is Loretta Kahl. My Mom's name is Doris. She'd been sick a long time. I'd give her her meds when she was home."

The seemingly endless episodes of rain stop. Big, heavy clouds drift away with a breeze out of the west. It is quiet as the campers take their afternoon naps in the lodge.

It turns into a hazy summer day. A red-winged blackbird hops in the wet grass and lands on a cattail in the marsh that's in front of the lodge.

A killdeer breaks the stillness with a plaintive, penetrating cry. Yellow, orange and lavender butterflies flit over a swale.

Camp director Tony Pohlen uses the nap time to check out conditions down at the lake. The muddy shoreline prompts him to cancel plans for a paddleboat outing.

Pohlen gathers a variety of equipment for outdoor recreation games and takes a short walk. The campers wake up, dance or talk in the lodge for a while and drift outdoors.

"Where did those bubbles come from?" asks Debbie Bakker, 24, of Highland. She looks like she's taken extra care about her looks today. She wears hot pink shorts, a white shirt and has a matching scrunchie pulling back her thick brown hair.

Walter Harrison, 46, of Connersville, sits at a picnic table up against the wall of the patio. He laughs silently. He loves the mystery he has created. Puzzled campers eventually spot him as they trace the trail of the shining liquid balls of rainbow colors.

The bubbles are a distraction for Debbie. She seems in a little pout as she refuses to play Frisbee with Fino Ortego, 42, of East Chicago. He leaves her and goes down the hill to play badminton with a group of campers.

Later, Debbie's mood has changed. She eventually joins others in a game of Frisbee.

Fino has rejoined her and their small group to plan a skit for competition against other campers. They decide to use the camp theme. They will talk about how they met friends. Someone asks Debbie how she met Fino.

"It was magic," she says. "I said: 'Hi. My name is Fino,'"

he says. "And the sparks flew," several people echo. Debbie and Fino gaze at each other as if all is well. Earlier in the day, they held each other close while Debbie stood in front of her wheelchair. "Hopelessly in Love with You" is their song.

The sparks between Debbie and Fino take on a different meaning when they are back inside. Fino dances in front of her chair. She waves him away.

He looks downcast as he walks back to sit in a chair against the wall. She crooks her finger. He hurries back to her. She says something. She waves him away.

"I don't know. I don't know what's wrong. She broke my heart in three places," says Fino as he sits back down. He looks forlorn. He goes back one more time and dances in front of her.

He talks about his full-time job. He works as a bagger at Sterk's Super Foods in East Chicago. He goes back one more time and dances in front of her. She rejects him.

Soon he's out on the dance floor learning some new steps with some new ladies. Debbie still looks sullen, not wanting to talk with Fino about the reason for their squabble.