



Tribune photo/REBECCA BELLING

Karl Crowell, in a blue sweatshirt, pretends to be part of a Christmas tree decorated by other campers during a Christmas skit at Sharing Meadows. The LaPorte County foundation runs a camp and several group homes at its Rolling Prairie location.

Sharing Meadows

Mentally impaired adults learn skills at special camp

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ROLLING PRAIRIE

Andy Zepik's eyes twinkle whenever he smiles, which is nearly all the time. He knows how to use his good looks and boyish charm to get the attention of even complete strangers.

All he has to do is stop smiling. "I can't do it," the 26-year-old said, sounding tearful as he put his head down on the craft table in despair. "It's too hard."

Zepik and a dozen other campers at Sharing Meadows were working on a

Christmas tree project to take back to their parents or group homes.

Sharing Meadows, a 187-acre camp and group home site, is dedicated to serving the needs of "other abled" adults, according to founder Rev. Dennis Blaney, a Holy Cross priest. Few resources exist for adults like Andy.

Most of the 25 campers had one of the 22 staff members help them make the tree from green construction paper and a tiny terra-cotta pot, but then they decorated the tree themselves with sequins, white paste and childlike delight.

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Camp

But not Andy. After charming a stranger into helping him make the tree and getting her hands covered with paste, he was off socializing with other campers and staff members, with no interest in trimming the tree.

"You do it," he coaxed, with excellent results.

There are many resources for mentally impaired children and their parents, Blaney explained. But once these children reach age 18, there is almost nothing for them. Their social lives revolve around their parents, and there is little opportunity for them to meet and socialize with others their age with similar impairments.

"I felt that these people needed more help than the kids," he said.

Blaney founded the Share Foundation in 1982 to help fill this void. The foundation purchased the land for the camp and group homes in 1991.

Today, the retired Catholic priest lives there, too. Six group homes dot the large parcel along with the large camp and vocational building. And to this day, the only similar organization Blaney knows of is in Texas.

The foundation plans to add more group home "villages." Villages consist of three group homes containing two "villagers" and a full-time, live-in house monitor. There is already one village at Sharing Meadows and another will open in weeks. Blaney has already picked out sites for future villages.

During the week, "villagers" learn vocations such as pottery painting, crocheting and computer skills at the camp building.

The foundation's mission is to help mentally impaired adults find a vocation, live a more independent life and have fun.

Through an aggressive fund-raising drive, Blaney hopes to raise enough for a swimming pool and other

improvements.

"Have you ever heard of a camp without a swimming pool?" he asked.

Similar to a children's camp, Sharing Meadows' camp weekends are reserved mostly for fun. They run once a month except for January and for a week at a time in the summer.

The Share Foundation is a not-for-profit organization supported entirely by private donations, Share Foundation Executive Director Kathleen Kelly said. Sharing Meadows takes a general Christian approach to working with impaired adults in camps and group homes.

On this early December weekend, the camp theme was Christmas.

"What's the best gift you received for Christmas?" Kelly asked the group during a quiet discussion hour.

The answers varied:

"A CD player!"

"A TV!"

"A Walkman!"

"If I gave you a beautiful gift and then I hit you, is that a good gift?" Kelly asked.

"No!" came the emphatic answer from camper Todd Topor, followed by giggles from all campers.

"What is the greatest gift of all?" Kelly, sitting in front of the Christmas tree and Nativity scene, asked the group, then answered her own question: "The greatest gift is love — how much God loves us to send baby Jesus down."

After the discussion, Kelly read a children's picture book to the group, who leaned in close to see the illustrations of Joshua, a little crippled lamb who could not join the others in a far-away grazing field because he is too slow.

But his lamb friend Abigail repeatedly reminded him, "Don't worry, little Joshua, God has a special place for people who feel left out."

And tucked away in a special place near Rolling Prairie, not one of 25 special adults felt left out.