

COMMENTARY

Inclusion at the heart of expanding YMCA program

By Greg Keresztury

Here at YMCA of the Pines in Medford, we have long been committed to serving people of diverse backgrounds, experiences and abilities. Typically, this has been through our specialty camps, which serve targeted populations, or through our partnerships with social service agencies.

However, this is not all we do. In recent years, we have taken larger steps to create more opportunities for campers with diverse abilities. I want to explore one step, as I believe our special needs collaborative, a program we began in 2017, exemplifies our core value of inclusion at YMCA of the Pines.

During the summer of 2017, we partnered with the Shamong School District to start a "community inclusion collaborative," in which we worked with school officials to bring students from the district's extended school year program to Lake Stockwell Day Camp for four weeks. The students were enrolled in the district's summer program mostly for its additional socialization opportunities, rather than for significant behavioral issues.

By removing the students from the pressures and stressors that can come from being in a school environment, and instead bringing them to our beautiful outdoor camp facility, the campers were able to enjoy a more traditional summer experience, all while building and developing the necessary social skills to enable them to succeed in life.

Of course, being able to do so while swimming or canoeing in a lake, taking target practice at archery, or creating friendship bracelets during arts and crafts also allowed the students to develop other

skills and learn more about what they can accomplish.

During its first summer at Lake Stockwell Day Camp, we found the program to be a tremendous success. The students, their families and the district praised how smoothly the transition from school to camp went and how positive the experience was for the students.

Because of this success, we expanded the program for the following summer and partnered with the Medford School District as well.

After experiencing more positive results in 2018, we expanded the program to the Tabernacle and Southampton school districts for this coming summer. We are excited for the opportunity to serve more local students through a positive camp experience.

Furthermore, we are especially gratified by the fact that through these partnerships, we are able to live our mission in a truly inclusive manner, by incorporating students who otherwise would be in a school setting into our camp program at Lake Stockwell.

This is what inclusion means to me and our organization, and is something that gives us great pride and satisfaction.

To conclude, I would like to thank our district partners from Shamong, Medford, Tabernacle and Southampton, who work so hard on their end to support this collaborative relationship, and the families within their districts who entrust us with their precious children.

It's truly awesome to see children become the best version of themselves, and we feel privileged to have a role in the process.

Greg Keresztury is the director of operations at YMCA of the Pines in Medford.