Not just any camp

Cerebral palsy volunteers are hooked on helping kids

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CLINTON - The first thing that strikes you about this session at Camp Ruth Lee is how normal it all seems - until you take a second look.

Walking toward the camp from the parking lot, you hear sounds of typical poolside happy talk. In the crafts area, some of the older boys are molding unmentionable items instead of Christmas ornaments. Softball is the outdoor activity for the afternoon. One girl gets stung by a bee and receives attention from the nurse on staff.

The sting is minor. The problem is that she has to be carried to the first aid cabin. For the most part, these campers are in braces, wheelchairs and strollers. Some are fortunate enough to be able to walk. All 67 have cerebral palsy. About 50 percent are mentally retarded as well. For many, it is the only camp which will accept them. For a few, it is the first time away from home.

These campers are the only possible because each child has an attendant. A conglomeration of high school and college students, adults and staff of United Cerebral Palsy, Louisiana totaling 90 - volunteer their time for ten days. Some are fulfilling a school requirement of community service. Some are related to the campers. It really doesn't matter. They all want to help. When they get home, they are hooked.

The bond between campers and staff each year at Camp Ruth Lee is formed. A former staff member now deceased, put it best on one occasion, "I would imagine there is probably an account of this all-district football player from Holy Cross High School in New Orleans - a big boy who could hit you every time," adds Naquin, who takes a break, after mapping the mess area before lunch. "The guys seem to be more affectionate with the kids in the last three years. The girls always were that way."

Naquin started going to camp seven years ago when he joined the staff. The camp is Naquin's brainchild. He has been there from day one. So have Vicky Petee, his administrative assistant, and Brenda Elliott, who began as an attendant and came back off and on during the camp's 13-year history. She attended University of New Orleans, had free time this summer and volunteered to be in charge of night activities.

Nurse Terry Mayer, the final member of the original group, works at East Jefferson Hospital.

"Vicky was pregnant, it was Terry's first time to be a nurse at a camp and Brenda was only 15," says Naquin, who also started a camp for children with muscular dystrophy, when he was affiliated with that group's state agency.

"We don't have job descriptions," he says of himself and the other three in the state CP office, Petee, Naquin and Cindy Crawford. "I don't believe in job descriptions. Our camp motto is 'Anything for our kids.'"

The work that Petee admits he doesn't like to punch a clock. He likes the freedom of this job, which involves administrative work, raising money and year-round travels.

The camp is funded strictly by public donation; there is no state or federal money. There are annual telethons in Monroe, Lafayette and Golden Meadow in addition to other fundraisers. What he doesn't say is that sometimes it means working around the clock. In the first years of the camp, that's just what Gustin did, taking the midnight shift every day. Lastly, he can delegate his authority because of more experienced volunteers. He is modest about his role in this camp's success, preferring to sing the praises of other volunteers.

"Someone has to stay up all night to check on the kids," he says. "To change them if they wet the bed or just forever up them. Now we take turns doing it."

Gustin lays it on the line to his volunteers before the camp session. He hopes to scare a few off when describing their duties, which include changing diapers on some, escorting some of the campers to the restroom and assisting some in dressing. The ones who choose to get on the buses are committed.

For instance, there is Gregory Cole, now a real estate agent, who has been volunteering since he was 13. One night during this session, he traded camp clothes for a business suit and dashed off to New Orleans to close a deal on a house.

"One minute a sophisticated businessman, the next Dancing Bear," says Cole, who returned to camp to portray the character in that night's circus.

After a dip in the pool, chef Dave Pettee comes in to prepare lunch. He has been paying his own way from Toledo, Ohio, to the camp for six years. Pettee, who is Vicky Petee's brother-in-law, was recruited after former cooks used peanut butter as a replacement for meat in a casserole. Gustin estimates Pettee has saved $3,000 annually on the food budget alone by making use of every morsel that is leftover and by insisting suppliers take back unused rations. His meal plans have to accommodate campers on soft and pureed food only. "I started out in food service and worked as a chef in restaurants and country clubs," says Pettee, who is now assistant director of operations for the Toledo school system.

Lowry Morris, swimming instructor, will graduate from LSU this year in special education. She would like to work with severely and profoundly handicapped and eventually open her own school. She has been coming to the UCP camp since her freshman year in high school.

"I teach swimming at my house in River Ridge," she says. "I had a CP girl as one of my students. I was her attendant here my first year."

Terry Mayer remembers when UCP called East Jefferson Hospital looking for a camp nurse.

"I volunteered and I kind of got hooked," she says, "If you didn't come, you'd miss it. Feeding while it becomes addictive. People just keep coming back. We can't get rid of them. A couple of stitches is about the worst injury we've had the whole history of the camp. I would imagine there is probably less injury at this camp since each kid has an attendant with them."

Mayer administers medication to campers three times daily.

"We bring them to the infirmary and I hand it out," she says. "If they don't slow up, we chase them down."

Megan Barra, a graphic artist from Lafayette, is in charge of crafts at the camp. She and her brother have been coming off and on for 10 years.

"I just like the kids," she says. "They can do pretty much anything anyone else does. Sometimes they need help to use their hands. They see something they think they can do and they really get off on it. We have an art show at the end of the week and they get very excited about it."

There is a problem selecting suitable crafts for kids ranging in age from 6-16 with various handicaps.

"We try to gear the crafts toward age," says Gustin. "Someone in a wheelchair may have different interests from someone else. There is such a broad range of campers. This has been giving us problems for years."

Not only do campers vary in age and handicap, they also range from poor to wealthy. Campers are accepted on a first come, first served basis. Gustin says volunteers actually bought clothes for at least one camper, who couldn't afford to buy them.

"Don't look at my shell, look at my heart," says Naquin, who wore the same t-shirt every day at the camp.

"I'll go back to Toledo, Ohio, and the camp for six years."
Cabins have ramps for wheelchair-bound

Jamie Aldridge and Mark Baker help Joe LeBlanc prepare for a masquerade party

John Gustin, United Cerebral Palsy state director, started the camp

Matthew Gianelloni helps Stuart Moore eat ice cream

Megan Barra and David Cumberland put mask on James Carey