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TOP STORY

Camp Jotoni families celebrate community in Warren

By ALEX PARKER-MAGYAR Editor Aug 16, 2017



Camp Jotoni camper Michael, of Warren, splashes around with camp volunteers Elizabeth Duong, of Bridgewater, and Community Day celebration on Sunday, Aug. 13. Please see related photos on page 2.

Photo by Debbie Weisman

WARREN TWP. - Area families and volunteers cultivated an atmosphere of friendship, appreciation and old-fashioned summer fun on Sunday afternoon, Aug. 13, at Camp Jotoni off Old Stirling Road.

The occasion was the camp's third annual "Community Day and End of Summer Celebration." Camp Jotoni is a day camp and sleep-away camp for children and adults with special needs. Owned and operated by the Arc of Somerset County, the camp is celebrating its 41st year.

Community Day attendees, along with the campers, enjoyed an afternoon of music, barbecue and near-perfect weather.

For some, the day was an opportunity to reflect on Camp Jotoni's tremendous impact on their lives.

"I can't say enough about this place," said Chris Pericone, a Bridgewater resident. "My son's been going here five years. It's the only time we have the school bus pull up and he's running to get on the bus."

Pericone, founder of the Green Brook-based Garden State Homebrewers club, manned a craft brew tasting tent at Community Day. He and his fellow club officers offered samplings from New Jersey microbreweries. Attendees stopped by the tent to wash down the burgers, hot dogs and pizza served on the opposite side of a large dining tent.

Pericone said he was nervous the first time his son hopped on the bus to Camp Jotoni, as his son had never been away for a full day other than going to school.

"He came off the bus at the end of the day really happy and really tired. He's talking a little now, but back then he wasn't really talking. So you didn't really know how his day was until the next day when he runs to get on the bus."

'We're It'

Campers get the full experience – rustic cabins, arts and crafts, physical education, nature activities, swimming and more. As Camp Jotoni serves children from as young as 5 to adults as old as 85, instructors are versatile in suiting programs to the individual. Camp counselors are made available for consistent one-on-one service for those who need it.

It's a tremendous experience for individuals with special needs, Camp Director Josh Burke explained, but it also offers a much-needed reprieve for parents and caregivers.

"It's about recreation, it's about the camper, but it's also just as much about a family getting a break," Burke explained. "Especially for adults, when their school funding ends, their options disappear. So for some families, we're it. We're their only two-week break for the rest of the year.

"So for that camper who may have a challenging behavioral issue or a more severe physical disability, whereas another camp may say 'I can't handle this,' we provide the one-on-one staffing to allow that camper to succeed."

Camp Jotoni's ability to cater to any camper is what sets it apart, Burke explained, noting the camp has a zero-rejection policy. The director – who started at the camp as a volunteer more than 20 years ago and never left – added the experienced staff makes that possible.

At about 1 p.m. on Sunday, Burke was fresh out of a dunk tank – certainly one of Community Day's more popular attractions. Campers also took advantage of a giant inflatable slide, lawn games like cornhole, and a face painting booth.

Like many Arc of Somerset County activities, the day was made possible by a network of volunteers.

Chad Heuvelman, a Warren Lions Club member, was flipping burgers and serving food with wife Bonnie, daughter Sierra, a Lions Club Leo, and son Cole.

"So many people drive by the sign for Camp Jotoni and they have no idea what's back here," he said. "So we're trying to help promote that a little bit, so people realize what's here and what it's all about."

While many area residents may not be familiar with the camp and its good works, Camp Jotoni is well-known among families of children and adults with special needs in the Tri-State Area.

On reputation alone, camp enrollment has increased by 45 percent in the past four years.

The camp will have served nearly 300 campers this summer by the time the season ends. The non-profit Arc of Somerset County wants to look beyond the summer season, however.

Capital Campaign

Summer camp season runs through late August, and camp programs in general run through October. Weekend-long camps in October feature such activities as tractor rides and visits to a corn maze.

After that, though, the camp has to cease operations for the winter. An ongoing capital campaign is seeking to change that.

The Arc is raising money to add heat and air conditioning to the cabins in order to run programs year-round. The campaign is also raising funds to install fully-accessible bathrooms in each cabin, a significant upgrade from the camp's outhouses.

The \$6 million campaign launched in 2014 would also renovate various camp buildings, and move the swimming pool closer to the cabins to create easier access for campers.

Winter programs, Burke said, would focus more on indoor activities, such as theater and arts and crafts. Offering programs throughout the year, he added, would again provide some reprieve for parents and guardians.

"We're on our way," he said of the campaign's progress. "I'm excited."

To learn more about Camp Jotoni, or to donate to the capital campaign, visit <http://campjotoni.org>.



From left, Aaron Westbrook, of Somerville, Camp Jotoni campers Luke and Chris, and Lauren Desatnick, of Basking Ridge, show off some dance moves at Community Day. Westbrook and Desatnick were among a host of attendees who have family members attending the camp.

