

RECREATION

Winter camp brings teen amputees together

Snowboarders catching air and skiers dropping into fresh powder are common wintertime sights in Utah's Wasatch Mountains. Thousands of people flock annually to resorts east of Salt Lake City to test their skills on "The Greatest Snow on Earth." Earlier this year, patients from Shriners Hospital for Children — Intermountain joined the tourists and locals at Snowbird Ski Resort for an innovative winter recreation camp for amputees. The Un-Limb-ited Ski and Snowboard Camp brought 10 teens from Utah and Colorado together with expert instructors and peer-level counselors for four days of skill building, goal setting, teamwork and social activities. When the powder finally settled, each camper had gained a greater understanding of skiing, snowboarding and themselves.

Un-Limb-ited

The Un-Limb-ited group was formed seven years ago by Intermountain Shriners Hospital Physical Therapist Matt Lowell and Child Life Specialist Carolyn Bergquist. Lowell had noticed that his prosthetic patients weren't trying new activities.

"These kids could walk on a level surface, but they seemed too intimidated to try soccer or dance. We wanted to give them a forum to participate in activities with all the other kids," Lowell said.

The group was originally conceived as an outpatient socialization and support group for young amputees and their siblings. Toddlers and teenagers alike, along with their families, came together at the hospital to compare notes and share experiences.

"These kinds of fun, informal interactions with other children can be very therapeutic," observed Bergquist.

From meetings at the hospital, the group expanded to providing more comprehensive recreational outings. Un-Limb-ited group members have since tried ice skating, water skiing, swimming, rock wall climbing, horseback riding and other fun, challenging activities with much success. Recreation therapists and prosthetists from the hospital joined

the group's staff, lending a wealth of interdisciplinary experience and peer-level support.

Still, organizing a four-day, overnight winter recreation camp proved to be a bigger challenge than imagined.

Planning

"Organizing the ski and snowboard camp was a massive undertaking," said Bergquist.

It was Un-Limb-ited's most comprehensive activity to date, involving hundreds of hours and nearly a year of planning and fundraising.



Ready for a day of winter sports activities, Ken Kozole, seating specialist at the Intermountain hospital, and Julian eagerly await the end of their ride on the ski lift.

The camp was truly a team effort. Additional staff from the hospital's nursing, therapy, and prosthetics departments volunteered at the camp and served as counselors. Monte Myers, a member of the U.S. Paralympic ski team, and Muffy Davis, a former Paralympian, both attended the camp and shared tips and lessons with the teens. Expert instructors from Wasatch Adaptive Sports made sure each camper had the best equipment possible and provided one-on-one instruction. Past and present Shriners hospitals prosthetists — themselves amputees — gave campers someone to relate and talk to.

"It was important to have peer-level amputees at the camp," said Lowell. "It let our kids see what people can accomplish with hard work, and gave them something to plan for in the future."

Results

Simply put, the camp was a hit. The teens enjoyed the greater sense of independence that came from getting away from their parents and hanging out with their peers — just what organizers had hoped for. For many campers it was their first extended time away from home. Fourteen-year-old Julian of South Jordan, Utah, had been skiing only once before. A bilateral above-elbow amputee, he took immediately to the snowboard.

"It was hard because I'd never done it before," he said. "But then it got easier. The counselors helped me with my balance and pretty soon I was getting up and down the mountain."

Julian enjoyed his new found freedom, even if it lasted for just a few days.

"The camp was fun. My parents weren't around to tell me what to do. I'd definitely go again," he said, with a gleam in his eye.

Tylan of Kaysville, Utah enjoyed the open spaces of the mountain resort as well. One of 17 children, Ty — a bilateral below-knee amputee — enjoyed having his own space and a hotel bed.

"It was so cool," he said. "I slept really good."

Like Julian, Ty spent a lot of time on the snowboard. Instructors fit him with adaptive, oversized



Tethered to his instructor for safety, Patrick, using a sit-ski, gets used to the mountain and to the possibility of skiing. The winter camp was a wonderful opportunity to learn new skills.

boots, which he wore backwards as he made test runs down the hill. Soon he was carving tight turns and completing run after run.

"It was so fun!" gushed Ty.

When they weren't checking out new gear or taking lessons, campers were sitting down for group meals and evening discussions. Camp counselors engaged the teens in dialogue about common issues faced by young amputees, such as peer pressure, ridicule, unsolicited questions or stares, and hopes for the future.

"Not everyone talked," said Lowell. "But they were all listening."

After four days, the camp wrapped up with a slide show and family ski day.

Ty's father, James, noted several positive changes when he picked up his son after camp.

"It gave him a lot of confidence, and he seemed to have made a lot of new friends," he observed. "Making friends with other teens that have similar conditions really made him feel like part of the group. The camp gave him some one-on-one attention, which is often hard to come by."

Julian's father agreed.

"Julian was very happy, really excited. It was a really good experience."