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Sports

Sweet dreams

A local nonprofit turns pipe dreams into sports realities.

By Christina Couch



EASY RIDER Extreme Recess makes sports such as water skiing a reality for Ben Spengel and other kids with disabilities.

Ben Spengel doesn't shy away from trying new sports. Though he was diagnosed with cerebral palsy at birth and now uses a walker or crutches to help get around, the 13-year-old seventh grader from McHenry has been water skiing and rock climbing, and even swooshed down the slopes at Chestnut Mountain in Galena during a family ski trip.

Those experiences were all thanks to Extreme Recess, an adventure sports program operated through the Loop-based nonprofit Dreams For Kids. For the last three years, Ben has joined roughly 100 other kids with physical and cognitive disabilities for monthly outings to try activities such as martial arts, water skiing and horseback riding—things that would challenge even athletically gifted children.

“The first time I went snow skiing, they put me in something that looked like a bobsled and sent me down the hill so fast,” Ben says. “It was unbelievable. It changed my life completely.” It’s changed Ben’s family too. Extreme Recess’s mission is threefold—to provide disabled youths with opportunities to participate in sports, to give their parents a much-needed break and to provide a place where families can have fun as a group. (Most of the organization’s outings are held in the Chicago area, and for those, like the ski trip, that aren’t, DFK provides transportation.)

“For parents who have kids with physical challenges, outings are a lot of stress on the whole family because you don’t know what you’re getting into, you don’t know how you’re going to have to help your child,” says Trish Spengel, Ben’s mother. “[Extreme Recess] is a day out for the parents, too, because I know that my child can go out and have fun with his able-bodied brother. That’s not something we were used to.”

DFK president and founder Tom Tuohy says the only thing harder than overcoming the kids’ physical challenges is defeating the depression, stereotypes and seclusion that often comes with getting left out of the mainstream. Some families have human and financial resources to provide their children with the greatest possible opportunities, but Extreme Recess also works with many low-income families in at-risk communities to help them deal with the problems of poverty on top of the physical limitations. To be disabled is hard in and of itself, he says, but to be disabled, poor and without a support system makes experiences like these near impossible.

“A couple of years ago, on our water-sports day, I was sitting on the pier,” Tuohy says. “The boat pulled up and they carried the kid who had just been waterskiing onto the pier next to me. He looked out over the lake and said ‘Oh, man. I’ve never seen a lake before.’ He’s 17 years old and lives in Cabrini-Green. He’s lived his whole life in a wheelchair [less than a mile from Lake Michigan]. In moments like that you realize how isolated these kids are.”

Tuohy provides the free outings by soliciting support from corporate donors, mobilizing thousands of volunteers—each Extreme Recess event requires at least one volunteer per participant—and providing scholarship support to single parents of kids with physical challenges. He founded DFK in 1989, a time when there weren’t any sports programs for disabled kids in Illinois. After a few years of working exclusively with the physically disabled population, Tuohy expanded the organization to include cognitive disabilities as well, starting with kids with autism.

“It was hard at first because sometimes it’s hard to reach a kid with autism,” Tuohy says. “But that’s not for us to decide. On our water-sports day, a kid got off the bus and started laughing. He fell face-first in the water, but kept laughing. For him, just being by the water was a breakthrough. We don’t have to understand it.”

Tyler Woodworth is also a testament to the power of DFK’s programs. In addition to doing Extreme Recess, the 14-year-old Lockport resident, who has cerebral palsy, also plays on a separate sled-hockey team. One day, he hopes to make the U.S. Paralympic team. But for now, all he’s thinking about is the soaring down snowy slopes with the same speed and grace as everyone else.

“It’s such a cool feeling, and a little terrifying,” he says. “But mostly cool. This is something I never thought I could do.”

Dreams For Kids’ annual Holiday For Hope party is December 18. To volunteer or get involved with the organization, call 866-729-5454 or go to dreamsforkids.org.

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