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In third year, surf camp providing opportunities for autistic children

By Cailin Riley



Thanks to blue skies, a gentle breeze and calm ocean conditions, the parking lot at Cupsogue Beach in Westhampton Dunes was packed to the gills on Saturday with families taking advantage of what was a picturesque summer day.

But for a certain group of parents and their children, it was more than just a nice day at the beach.

For the third consecutive year, Community Options, Inc. hosted its iMatter Surf Camp for children with autism spectrum disorders.

Community Options Inc. is a national non-profit organization that provides residential, employment and recreational services to individuals with disabilities. The camp was started three years ago and is based on research that supports the concept that water is effective as a therapeutic tool and can also help encourage functional movement and range of motion for children with developmental disorders. The camp also aims to give children a chance to have fun and build self esteem.

Dr. Jessica Guberman, the executive director of Community Options Inc., says she has been thrilled to watch the growth of the camp. In 2007, the first year, 20 children took part in the camp, but on Saturday, a total of 95 children participated.

"The iMatter Surf Camp is a magical day," she said. "Families are so eager to sign their children up for the event and to participate in an innovative and inclusive activity that connects children to the fun and therapeutic advantages of the water."

On Saturday, parents watched from the shore, cheering and offering words of encouragement to their children as they were gently guided through the small shore break on large foam surfboards. There was plenty of laughter and smiles and no signs of frustration or tantrums; most of the children looked content to stay in the water for hours and eagerly scampered back onto their boards after each ride.

Paula and Michael Prestia of East Setauket were at the camp for the first time on Saturday with their son Anthony, 14. They said that after attending another surf camp for children with developmental disorders last year and seeing their son enjoy it so much, they were eager to try it again.

"The last time we did it, he got up on the board," Paula said. "He's pretty good in the water."

Paula watched her son and took pictures as she spoke about the camp and the positive impact it has had on her son and the other children in the water.

"It's a wonderful thing they do," she said. "It's a great opportunity that these kids would normally never have."

When asked if Anthony gives her any feedback about his experience once he gets out of the water, Paula said it wasn't hard for her to discern that he was having a good time.

"Look at his smile," she said. "Certain things you don't need words for. He's not looking to come out."

Jennifer Brown of Ronkonkoma said that the camp has worked similar wonders for her son Robert, 12.

"He absolutely loves the waves," she said. "If he keeps wanting to do it again, then I assume he's loving it."

Jennifer, like Paula, spoke highly of the surf camp and the people who put it together.

"They're phenomenal," she said. "I love Jessica for figuring this out."

For more information, contact jessica.guberman@comop.org.

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mailbag@27east.com

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Ph: 631-287-1500