

Community helps Camp Wamp give to disabled kids

By Terri Daoust

Portola Editor

Imagine an opportunity for disabled children to camp out in a natural setting, immerse themselves in the wilderness, sleep under the stars, and realize dreams they thought would never come true.

Imagine these children having a life-changing experience that enhances their self-esteem, teaches them that their disabilities are not limitations, and gives them the confidence to make the very best of their lives.

This opportunity is now a reality at Camp Wamp (Wheelchair Accessible Mountain Programs) that opened up this summer at Lake Hawley.

Camp Wamp is the childhood dream of Stephen Wampler.

He is reopening the same camp that changed his life decades ago, with hopes that it will have the same pro-

found effect on others in his situation.

Wampler was born with cerebral palsy and has been wheelchair bound since early childhood.

In 1977, at age 9, he attended the camp for disabled children, which changed his life and led him to realize his full potential.

Although his disability is considered to be quite severe, Wampler realized he was capable of camping, boating, fishing and many other seemingly small activities that have enabled him to be the husband, father, and businessman that he is today.

Soon after that life-changing experience, the camp he attended was closed due to lack of funding and management.

Now, Wampler has gained access to the very same land and camping facilities and has re-opened the camp for others.

Hawley Lake is about a two-hour drive from Johnsville on a dirt road.

The land was purchased by then California State Senator John Nagedly in 1989. He bequeathed the property to the Boy Scouts of America.

It was then sold in 2002 to the Contra Costa Youth Council, which is under the leadership of the senator's son, Jim Nagedly.

Wampler approached Nagedly in 2002 and asked if it would be possible to operate the camp again.

"It is through Nagedly's generosity and willingness to lease the land to Camp Wamp, that it has become a reality.

The camp director is Jenny Yarrow, who has had 18 years of experience working with children and young adults who have mental and physical disabilities.

Yarrow and her staff hosted 30 campers for two, one-week sessions this summer.

Campers have a counselor allocated to them for their week at camp and 10 support staff operated the outdoor programs.

The philosophy of the camp is to give rich, varied and closely supervised activity programs with few structured schedules.

Wampler said the unique and rugged wilderness experience, normally only available to able-bodied persons, provides the freedom and guidance to explore new possibilities and to expand the often very limited expectations of the campers, as many seemingly trivial challenges have to be conquered.

Wampler spent a few years getting the camp ready for the children and on one of his trips to the area, he stopped off to enjoy dinner at Plumas Pines Golf Course.

While there he had the chance to talk to owner Al Cleary about the plans to open

the camp.

Cleary took the project under his wing and last June Longboards Bar & Grill at Plumas Pines hosted a dinner to help raise money for Camp Wamp.

Longboards Executive Chef Sean Conry said he hopes to host the dinner every year.

Conry and his staff did much more than host the dinner.

Conry asked many of his food and beverage vendors for donations and those items that were not donated were contributed by Longboards' kitchen.

Conry said that for two weeks, Longboards' kitchen staff, as well as many other friends and family, donated time and supplies to the camp.

"Working in shifts of two or four persons, Longboards provided chefs to cook meals for the children and counselors," he said.

Each team drove the two

hours into the mountains and served breakfast, lunch and dinner to the campers.

"Within the first few days word had spread that this was such a rewarding and exciting experience, many others throughout the community expressed a desire to be involved and headed up the mountain as well," said Conry.

Conry said he hopes more people will come out for the fund-raiser next year, volunteer to help, or donate any amount they can to help ensure the camp's continued operation.

Residents of the Quincy area also stepped forward to volunteer their time and services. Some of the volunteers, such as Judge Garrett Olney, remember the camp from earlier days.

Members of the Quincy Lions Club collected and moved food and other supplies to the camp.