

Camp gives disabled a taste of the wild

By Jane Braxton Little
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JOHNSVILLE - Just above a remote lake high in the northern Sierra Nevada, Greg Watson rolled his wheelchair through the dirt to a camp table, set the brakes and stared at a pile of fluff that used to be an owl pellet. Using tweezers, the Oakland teenager meticulously picked out a delicate bone fragment and matched it to an illustration on a chart on the table beside him.

"Shrew skull. Definitely," said Watson, smiling faintly under his black Raiders cap.

At another table, another teenager was starting a rope necklace, with one end of the cord tied to her metal crutch, the other held taut by her teeth. Nearby two boys wheeled over rocks and roots to settle a bet over archery. Whoever lost had to roll in the dirt.

This is Camp WAMP, a wilderness adventure for kids with physical disabilities. During their seven days in the woods this month, Watson and 15 other young adults swam and hiked, built lean-tos, identified animals and slept under the stars. Each day introduced a new survival challenge for teams that created their own names, mottos and cheers.

Set under towering pines of Tahoe National Forest at Hawley Lake, Camp WAMP is a torturous four-wheel-drive trek 12 miles from the closest paved road. It's primitive: no electricity, no paved paths and no sleeping cabins.

In the midst of raw nature, however, campers find friend-

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Steve Wampler
Camp WAMP's founder

ship, self-reliance and a sense of their own capacities, said Steve Wampler, the camp's founder. No one leaves unchanged.

"We get them out of their environment and the barriers come down. I see them going from scared and unsure of themselves to aware of what they can and can't do," he said.

Like most of the campers, Wampler, 36, has had cerebral palsy since he was born. At 9, he went to the camp 40 miles north of Truckee. Easter Seals ran it then, and Wampler returned for nine summers until he was too old to attend.

He went on to graduate from the University of California, Davis, and start his own business, but he never forgot the Sierra camp. It changed his life, said his wife, Elizabeth.

"This is where the light went on for him. This is where he realized he could do anything," she said.

After dreaming about introducing wilderness camping to

kids in wheelchairs, two years ago Wampler decided to take a leave of absence and reopen this camp, which had been closed for several years.

He named it Camp WAMP: Wheelchair Adventure Mountain Programs.

Thirty disabled campers arrived last August strapped into a fleet of rugged rigs driven by volunteers from several four-wheel-drive clubs, Quincy and Graeagle Lions clubs. This year another 30 rode in the same way.

It was not love at first sight for Emma Yung Joo, 22. She took one look around the hillside under the trees and had questions: "Where are the cabins? Where is the cement pavement? All I saw was dirt and logs - and no cabins," she said.

Sleeping outside on the ground was uncomfortable and she worried about snakes, but Yung Joo was afraid to tell anyone. Left without her familiar electric wheelchair, however, she found she could not negotiate on her own up hills and around trees.

"I tried to do everything by myself, but I got frustrated. I realized I needed help," said Yung Joo, who will enter American River College this fall.

Camp WAMP was the first wilderness experience for Jenny Zimmer, 19. Getting out of her wheelchair, negotiating an air mattress and sleeping on the ground were only part of what she found awkward.

"This is so out of my comfort zone. I don't do bugs. I don't do dirt. And I don't crawl around at home," she said.

Here, however, she did all of that. Midway through what she thought would be a weeklong ordeal, something changed. "The bugs are my friends. Going home is going to be weird," Zimmer said.

Sitting in a wheelchair close beside her, Shay Robertson laughed in agreement. "This is surviving. Being friends with the earth is good," she said.

No one who attends Camp WAMP pays a fee.

The Wampers raised enough money through their foundation to send 145 children to camp this summer, 30 of them to this wilderness setting. Their goal is to send 1,000 disabled children to camp a year.

Wampler plans to expand his program to Yosemite National Institutes, a nonprofit organization that hosts outdoor education programs at its three wilderness camps.

But he'll be back at Camp WAMP next year. "This is where it all began for me. My heart will always be right here," he said.

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