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Disabled people spend Day at the Beach

Fun in the sand, surf

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Three little girls sat in the wet sand in front of the governor's beach house at Island Beach State Park while waves lapped at their feet.

Then one of them, Juliet Sereda, 7, of Manchester, gripped a plastic shovel tightly and got to work digging.

It was not long before she found herself sitting in a hole, with her two helpers — her sister, Olivia, 3, and Tanisha Stokes, 5, of Newark — who made the hole bigger and bigger.

As the girls worked, the waves worked, too, filling the hole in, splashing the girls and making them break into surprised giggles.

Just another day at the beach? Yes and no. For some who attended the 20th annual Day at the Beach hosted by the Family Resource Network and Epilepsy Foundation, it was anything but a typical summer day.

Parris Mack, 25, of Paulsboro in Gloucester County was at the beach for the very first time.

"I love it. It's beautiful, and I got five shells," said Mack, who is autistic, and participated in the Family Resource Network's Out and About program, which gives participants a chance to socialize and take part in activities they might not otherwise have access to because of their disabilities.

Mack, who grew up in Camden, and members of the Sereda and Stokes families were among 175 people who came to the free event open to people who have special needs or developmental disabilities such as epilepsy, autism, mental retardation, spina bifida, traumatic brain injury, Down syndrome and cerebral palsy. It is held each year at the private beach in front of the governor's house at the state park.

"Because it is held at a private location, those attending don't feel overwhelmed by large crowds typically found at the Jersey Shore," said Liza Gundell, deputy director of the network and foundation.

"People don't have to worry about their child's behavior. Other families understand," said Gundell.

Lindsay Sereda, mother of Juliet, who has Down syndrome, said she came to the event with her sister, Tammy Phillips of Bellmawr. Phillips' daughter Hannah, 16, who has cerebral palsy, has been a participant each year, but was unable to attend this year, her mother said.

"It's great that this event is held for our children. They get a chance to socialize with other children, and the parents get a chance to socialize and network with one another," Lindsay Sereda said.

Sandy Streimer of Manalapan and her son Jimmy, 10, sat in beach chairs under an umbrella, while another son, Zachary, 9, rode the waves with the rest of the family.

Jimmy and Zachary have autism, Streimer said, but Jimmy's twin, Amanda, does not.

"It was a nightmare when they were younger, but a day like this gives us a chance to relax at the beach without having to worry," Sandy Streimer said.

The Davis family of Lakewood strolled along the sand. Millicent Davis guided her son Garrett, 13, who is autistic, up to the blanket.

"This is our first year coming, and it's very nice," she said as her husband, Glenn, and son Georgie did some swimming.

"We just came back from Cancun, so this is like an extension of our family vacation," Glenn Davis said.

Although Garrett stood silent most of the time, Glenn Davis said he could tell his son was having a good time.

"He doesn't have a frown on his face, and he's relaxed," Glenn Davis said.

Ten-year-old Sarah Scofield of the Colonia section of Woodbridge was intent on digging in the sand — right in the middle of three lifeguards who watched the beachgoers.

Sarah came to the state park with her mother, Ellen Scofield, and brother Joseph, 13.

"She loves the beach. And as you can see, she's not shy about meeting people," said her mother, who said it was the first time the family had visited Island Beach State Park.

Sarah has autism, attention deficit disorder and a speech delay, her mother said.

"She was 2 1/2, and she wasn't talking at all," Ellen Scofield said.

Scofield said she turned to Helping Hands, a group that is part of the Family Resource Network and Epilepsy Foundation, when she was seeking someone who could watch her daughter for a few hours to give her a break.

She said the Family Resource Network has provided a support system for her, and activities, such as the Day at the Beach, where no one wonders why the little girl is playing in the sand right in between the lifeguards.

While Dennis Costello picked up his son Ethan, 14, and ran into the breaking waves, Janet Costello, checked on the family's newest child, Sean, 8 months, who lay in the shade under an umbrella and small tent.

The North Plainfield family, which also includes Gavin, 8, and Mikey, 6, has attended the Family Resource Network's annual Day at the Beach for the past four years.

"We're treated like we are movie stars. Parking is close. There's food prepared for you and bathrooms nearby. It's a lifesaver for families who have a special-needs child," said Janet Costello. Her son Ethan has Down syndrome, she said.

Kim Coll, 42, of Cherry Hill said she loves the beach.

She came to the Day at the Beach with her mother, Ronnie Coll, and a friend, Joey Meiz, 27, of Medford.

Kim Coll and Meiz are athletes who will be competing in a Special Olympics golf event, Ronnie Coll said.

"She won a gold medal in tennis and likes bowling, swimming, ice skating and roller skating. She also has a driver's license and is very independent," Ronnie Coll said, listing her daughter's accomplishments.

Kim Coll has a usually fatal disease known as Ehlers-Danlos syndrome, and her mother said she has outlived the projected life expectancy for the inherited disease, which affects collagen production and connective tissues.

Kim Coll, who added that she is a state self-advocate for awareness of the disease, said this is the second time she has attended the Day at the Beach event.

"The first thing I did today was go into the water," she said as the water dripped from her long dark hair.
