

COURIER-POST

South Jersey's Newspaper | courierpostonline.com

People with special needs enjoy the beach

by Bonnie Delaney - Gannett New Jersey
August 19, 2009

BERKELEY — Movies, bowling, dancing and a day at Island Beach State Park were on the agenda Monday for the 97 people enrolled in the Southern regional Out and About program run by the Family Resource Network.

Carrie Ruffin, regional director, said clients come from Cape May, Burlington, Gloucester and Camden counties.

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

She came to the 20th Annual 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 the Special Olympics golf event, said Ronnie Coll.

“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,” said Ronnie Coll.

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 said this is the second time she has attended the event.

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

“I love it. It’s beautiful and I got five shells,” said Mack, who grew up in Camden, has autism, and participated in the Out and About program, which gives participants a chance to socialize and take part in activities they might not otherwise have access to due to their disabilities.

The event -- for people who have special needs or developmental disabilities such as epilepsy, autism, mental retardation, spina bifida, traumatic brain injury, Down syndrome and cerebral palsy -- 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 Family Resource Network.

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

Lindsay Sereda's daughter Juliet has Down syndrome, and they came to the event with Sereda's sister, Tammy Phillips of Bellmawr. Phillips said her 16-year-old daughter, Hannah, who has cerebral palsy, has been a participant in previous years but wasn't able to attend this year.

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

Sandy Streimer of Manalapan and 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," 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, his father said he could tell that he was having a good time. "He doesn't have a frown on his face and he's relaxed," Glenn Davis said.