

'They let us go all out'

Kids have a ball at summer camp for visually impaired children



BY ELLEN MOYNIHAN
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The sounds of bowling balls on polished wood and tumbling pins filled the air as 7-year-old Charna Elias held hands with a volunteer, skipping toward an open lane. With assistance, she dropped a ball down a ramp and smiled to the cheers of volunteers and camp counselors.

As she rose to leave, one of her small hands clutched the cane she was still learning to use and adults verbally guided her down stairs.

Charna is one of 21 blind and visually impaired children, ages 7 to 14, who attended the Jewish Community Center Brooklyn's summer camp for the first year at Fort Hamilton Army Base in Bay Ridge, aiming for strikes alongside 600 of their sighted peers.

The camp, the first in Brooklyn for visually impaired children, was free.

The two-week session, which ended last week, was launched by the Kings Bay Young Men's-Young Women's Hebrew Association and JCC Brooklyn, in partnership with UJA-Federation of New York and Helen Keller Services for the Blind.

While activities could be tailored to children with little or no sight, nothing available to other kids was off-limits to them — painting and archery included.

"In other camps, even if we're not scared, they would just do things that they think a blind person would be OK with," said Lana Mamatkazina, 12. "But here they let us go all out."

"It makes us open up new possibilities and new abilities," continued Lana, who is going into seventh grade and lives in Long Island City, Queens. "In my school I've been swimming since, what, first grade, and I learned zero. But here, in two days, I was able to float on my back for about a minute."

The 177-acre campground provided ample space for adventures large and



Lana Mamatkazina, 12 (left), enjoys the Extreme Air Jumper at camp for visually impaired children in Brooklyn. Above, kids take in the great outdoors at the two-week camp on the grounds of Fort Hamilton Army Base.

small, from a ropes course to cooking class, weaving lanyards and turns on the Extreme Air Jumper — a contraption where the child is strapped into a frame with a harness and uses an inflatable cushion to launch themselves as high as 30 feet in the air.

"We really want them to have bruised knees and a little bit of sunburn and make friends," said Daniel Zeltser, Kings Bay chief operating officer.

The camp, aiming for inclusiveness, struck a balance between serving the hundreds of sighted campers and specialized attention for the other children, creating a camaraderie among those whose vision is compromised. In addition to the sighted camp staff, there were visually challenged volunteers — four who are blind, and one with low vision.

"They're getting to be with other blind kids," said volunteer Rachel Bowdek, 38, a teacher of visually impaired students from Rockland County. "They're having a grand time."

"We are trying to do as much stuff with hands as possible," said Irina Kocherova, Kings Bay's director of special needs services.

Kocherova, a special education teacher who worked with Helen Keller Services for the Blind for 18 years, trained the staff by blindfolding them and having them rely on partners to guide them through activities, giving them a sense of what the visually impaired campers might experience.

"I'm happy that I don't feel left out of any activities because I'm usually the only visually impaired student, but when I'm at camp there are so many people who are

like me, and it just makes me feel comfortable," said Dayanara Landeros, 13, a rising eighth-grader from Eltingville, S.I., who said making s'mores and a clay bowl were among her camp highlights.

Organizers and campers alike hope the camp can grow from its first summer.

"Next year we're hoping to double in time and go to four weeks," said Zeltser. He also aims to enroll 35 children for summer 2024. "I want to see more next year, I want this camp to expand, I want more people to come."

Kocherova watched some of the 21 campers splash and laugh in the pool next to the Verrazano Bridge, including some who hadn't been in the water all summer before they came to JCC.

"This is what we were struggling for," she said.