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Visually impaired youth find independence at Camp Abilities Four Corners

Program was created for visually impaired children living in rural areas

By Bailey Duran Special to The Journal

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Children enrolled in this year's Camp Abilities Four Corners participated in a river adventure on the San Juan River. (Courtesy of Vicki Numkena)

Camp Abilities Four Corners, a weeklong sports camp for visually impaired and blind children ages 9-17 on the Navajo Nation, recently wrapped up its fifth summer season with a three-day rafting adventure on the San Juan River.

The camp's river expedition, which is made possible by Ancient Wayves River Company, Delta Gamma Service for Sight, Arizona Diamondbacks Foundation, Forseeable Future Foundation, Camp Abilities World grants and more, concluded with camping in tents, campfires and s'mores.

During the river trip, many of the participating campers were given active roles, while discovering their strengths, overcoming challenges and strengthening the bonds with their fellow campers, a news release from the camp said.

The camp featured adaptive hiking with specialized canes, swimming lessons, Goalball (a sport designed for people with vision impairments), Bocce Ball and karaoke. The campers also went to the Grand Canyon's South Rim, where they hiked Bright Angel Trail and learned more about California condors.

Camp Abilities Four Corners is a branch of founder Dr. Lauren Lieberman's Camp Abilities, which was created with the goal that no child with visual impairment would have to travel more than 200 miles to attend a summer camp like other children. Camps sharing the name exist in multiple states and countries.

> Camp Abilities Four Corners was founded after Camp Director Vicki Numkena, a retired physical education teacher and teacher of students with visual impairments, saw the lack of opportunities for these children.
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> Numkena said she was "sad and frustrated" when teaching students with visual impairments that they didn't have many opportunities to engage in sports because of their rural location, with other camps at least eight to 10 hours away.
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> "I felt we needed a camp in 'our backyard.' After I retired, with the help of many people, my dream has come true," she said.

Campers with Camp Abilities Four Corners are taught independence and what is available to them in their rural community. (Courtesy of Vicki Numkena)

The camp emphasizes sports and other activities while promoting independence. Numkena said many of the children who attend have never met another child who is vision impaired, and adults who are visually impaired also participate as role models, demonstrating what is possible for the children as they grow.

“Our camp provides rural kids the opportunity to go to camp, experience a variety of sports that include adaptations for their specific vision challenges, meet other kids their age who also have a vision impairment and not have to travel major distances to get to camp,” Numkena said. “It is a chance for the students to be away from loving, but often overprotective parents. It is an opportunity to be as independent as they possibly can be and to work on skills of daily living. It is also a time to make lasting friendships.”

Beyond athletics, the program includes recreational activities, art and music.

One parent shared that her daughter joined her school's cross-country team and a pageant and saw reduced bullying after attending the camp. Another parent said her son became more outgoing after trying swimming, golfing and rock climbing, and has stayed in touch with the friends he made at camp. A third family said the experience allowed their son to open up to new people and activities.

"Our camp is in a rural area and we make sure that the kids see that there are many opportunities in their home communities to play sports," Numkena said. "They learn from their camp experience what adaptations work for them and go home with a report that provides this information. Then they can share it with their family, their PE teacher and after school sports coaches."

Families interested in next year's camp can visit the website to review eligibility, which requires a visual impairment and ability to participate in physical activities, then complete the athlete interest form. Questions can be directed to campabilitiesfourcorners@gmail.com.

Organizers are also developing a fall family golf clinic for Aug. 29-30 in Farmington, including golf practice, foot golf and bowling. More details will appear on the website starting Aug. 1.

The camp's website is campabilitiesfourcorners.org.

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