

Building the Bridge

by Doralisa Palomares

From the hubbub of activity in the main activity room, returning camper Vanessa Gonzales, age 7, stated that she liked painting the sun catchers. First-year camper Ashlee Gustason told her group's counselor that she enjoyed making the piñatas. At first glance, amidst the assortment of arts and crafts, this lively group of girls are participating in very typical summer camp activities. However, this camp is anything but typical. Ashlee, for example, is not speaking verbally to her counselor; she is using sign language.

"Come Fly With Us," an innovative day camp designed to mainstream developmental and physically challenged girls, brings over 100 girls together every summer. Started in 1979 by the Girl Scouts of Santa Clara County (GSSCC), "Come Fly With Us" is open to all young women between the ages of 6 and 13. Campers with any degree of physical or developmental disabilities are welcome. In addition, girls are recruited from various schools and within the Girl Scout troops, but they do not have to be a Girl Scout in order to participate in the summer program.

This year's "Come Fly With Us" program ran from June 20-24 and June 27 to July 1 at Prusch Park in San Jose. The day camp, run entirely by volunteers, is limited to a maximum of 60 girls per session. During these two week-long sessions, both disabled and non-disabled girls are placed in groups of approximately ten campers, assisted by counselors and crew. The small groups allow a "one-on-one experience" and enable the counselors and crew to understand and familiarize themselves with the campers. They participate in activities adapted to integrate all the girls, despite their varying abilities. The program's goal is to join all girls with differing degrees of development and teach them self-confidence in themselves. Here, everyone is the same.

"This program is very dynamic," explained Sandy Rosero, program manager of the "Come Fly With Us" summer camp. "The girls interact and learn to work together as a team. There are no differences between disabled and non-disabled. Instead, they

learn to help each other." Counselor Christy Byrne, age 15, who is new to the program, said "You learn not to take things for granted."

All counselors and crew undergo special training to learn the skills needed to work with girls of varying disabilities, as well as the necessary techniques to implement mainstreaming and plan the girls' activities accordingly. For example, first-year volunteer Donna Reeder integrated the hearing-impaired girls in her group by using her knowledge of sign language. Her group's skit for Parents' Night consisted of all the girls, hearing-impaired or not, doing a poem in sign language. "It introduced the hearing girls to the deaf world in a non-threatening way." Other camp activities over the week-long period included playing parachute games, putting together a mini-cookout of pizzas and potato salad, tie-dyeing T-shirts, making friendship necklaces or bird feeders, and preparing a skit for Parents' Night. All of the groups participate in the many activities at alternating times during the week.

Some campers choose to repeat the enriching experience "Come Fly With Us" provides by returning year after year and eventually becoming counselors. Counselor Wendy Yeakel, age 15, returned because "I enjoy the kids. You get to see them grow up." Sarah Tait, a veteran camper turned counselor, said she enjoyed "learning to help kids." At times, however, it proved to be a difficult experience. "The hardest part is to get the kids to obey." Likewise, 13 year-old Melissa Nighswonger, who has been in the program for four years and is now a counselor, remarked "The camp gives me more experience with kids. You learn that with deaf kids, it takes a little more time."

Parents may also find themselves with a fresh perspective on the "Come Fly With Us" program. Rosero recounted the story of a parent who was surprised at her daughter's new friend. "Throughout the summer, her daughter would talk about a new friend at camp and the things they did together. When the mother finally met her daughter's friend, she was surprised to find out that the friend was disabled. Her daughter never mentioned it once."