

Camp time in Oakhurst for hearing-impaired kids

By YESENIA AMARO - yamaro@mercedsunstar.com – Monday, July 30, 2012



OAKHURST -- The Merced Regional Airport had a little more activity than usual this weekend, as dozens of planes landed to pick up and drop off deaf and hard-of-hearing children from across the state.

"The children are here to participate in Camp Pacifica, a two-week program for children who are deaf, hard of hearing, or have parents or siblings who are deaf. Every participant must be able to communicate in sign language" said Jill Loving, who oversees the camp, which is broken into two groups. "This is where they form friendships for life with other children with some of the same challenges they have," she said.

Camp Pacifica, which is in its 35th year, has been held for 20 years in Oakhurst at the California Lions Camp owned and operated by Lions Club District 4-A1, Loving said. Serving children ages 7 to 15, the program is meant to provide an environment in which deaf children interact and bond. Campers take part in horseback-riding lessons, swimming and boating, and other sports and games, as well as arts, dance and drama.

On Saturday, a group of about 40 children were flown home after a one-week stay at the camp. On Sunday, a new group of about 65 children arrived for this week's session. Participants were flown by volunteer pilots with Angel Flight West, a nonprofit that



provides free air transportation to people "with serious medical conditions and other compelling needs" who otherwise wouldn't be able to make the trip, according to its website. Robert McGregor, a volunteer pilot, was one of the first to arrive Sunday morning. He brought campers from Hayward and has volunteered for Angel Flight for a few years. "It's the finest service that we can provide for a lot of needy people," he said. The campers later were taken to the camp to begin their one-week adventure.

As an example of some of the fun activities, last week a small group of youth held their hands behind their backs as they tried to eat. Staff members also must know sign language. Some are students in the deaf and hard-of-hearing program at California State University, Fresno, and members of the American Sign Language Club in Fresno.



"The kids really love it -- they get a good kick out of it," Lisa Perez, program and staff director, said through sign language interpreter Scott Yoneda. Staff Members also must know sign language. Some are students in the deaf and hard-of-hearing program at

at California State University, Fresno, and members of the American Sign Language Club in Fresno.

Brooke Bateman, who serves as director over the campers, said she believes the program makes a difference in the children's lives. "I think it changes their life -- just their outlook of being deaf," she said. "They can learn from other children on how to cope with being deaf."



Some students come back more than once, Bateman said. "They look forward to it all year-round."

Gisele Avalos, 15, of Merced was born deaf. This was her third year attending the camp. "It's really good overall," she said. "It's a lot of fun." Gisele said participants get to make good friends. "I think the best thing is that I get to see them again," she said. Uxmal Alcaraz, 13, of Merced also was born deaf. This was his second year at camp. He said it's boring at home during the summer, but at camp he's able to engage in fun activities. Uxmal's favorite time is working with the horses, particularly "learning how to ride them and how to control them," he said.



The camp has an emergency medical technician available 24-7, Carol Walter, also known as the "Camp Mom." Some of the younger participants tend to get homesick. "But we work really hard to keep them here," Loving said.

The camp is made possible with funds raised by Lions Club District 4-A1 during the year. The district raises about \$120,000. Half goes to help maintain the California Lions Camp, while the other half is used to help support the two-week program.

The fund also pays for the campers' admission costs. It costs about \$300 per child to participate in the camp, but the participants attend at no cost, according to Dee Heller, who's with the Atwater-Winton Lions Club.

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Photos courtesy of Marci Stenberg - Merced Sun-Star - Marci Stenberg/mstenberg@mercedsunstar.com

Banners made by the youths attending the deaf and hard of hearing camp, are displayed all around the dining hall at Lions Camp Pacifica, in Oakhurst.

