

# Is MDA camp in your future?



**Jim Williams**

Every summer since 1955, kids have been granted the opportunity to escape the repetitious hardships of reality and relax among peers at one of MDA's summer camps, which now number more than 90. To make it even better, campers are able to attend at no cost to themselves or their families. The cost of camp is covered by generous donors all over the country like NALC.

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**At MDA camp, kids with neuromuscular diseases discover** a world created specifically for them and meet many other kids sharing the same needs and experiences. MDA campers dream about summer camp all year and often say it's better than Christmas; some even say it's changed their lives. Almost all campers agree that it's "the best week of the year."

MDA camp offers a fun and safe outdoor experience, along with opportunities to engage in activities such as horseback riding, swimming, adaptive sports, arts and crafts, camp dances and much more. In addition to all of the fun it offers, MDA camp enables campers to stretch their comfort zones and grow in independence as they spend a week away from home; permit someone other than their parents to provide personal care; and make new friends. Sure, there's an abundance of fun and games at MDA camp, but if you talk to MDA campers, they'll tell you the real benefits come in a much subtler form—the lifelong friendships, the increased self-esteem and confidence, and the chance to spend at least one week of the year in a place where physical disabilities are the norm rather than the exception.

For parents and guardians, MDA camp provides a brief break from their roles of caregiver for a child with neuro-

muscular disease. It's a place where parents know they can send their children for a week of summer fun and, at the same time, be assured that their child's medical and physical needs will be met by a team of dedicated health professionals and trained camp volunteers. MDA staff and volunteers assume all camper care, including physical and emotional support, allowing parents much-needed time to attend to their own needs and, in some cases, spend some special time with the campers' siblings.

**Here are some thoughtful answers as to the biggest highlights of this special week:**

- “The reasons I like MDA camp are: seeing people that actually see you for who you are, being with people who are just like you, experiencing things you thought you could never do (i.e., horseback riding), and dancing without worrying if people are laughing at you,” says Olivia Davis of Castro Valley, CA, who was the MDA goodwill ambassador for Northern California in 2003. Olivia, 17, has congenital muscular dystrophy.
- “MDA summer camp allows kids to have the childhood that many of us never are able to experience,” says Laura-Beth Jacquin, 20, of Atlanta. The MDA goodwill ambassador for West Massachusetts in 2000, Laura-Beth has Freidreich's ataxia (FA). “I love to watch the other campers enjoy the relaxed, exciting and fun week of camp that everyone deserves to have.”
- “The people who go to camp are pretty much amazing,” says Jennifer Sutton, 16, of McHenry, IL, who also has FA. “They're like my second family—I've been going to camp for eight years and I've met my best friends there. I can be myself because I know everyone else is going through what I go through.”
- John Ryan, 19, of Spring Valley, NY, has FA. He says, “Every summer, I look forward to going to camp—it's definitely the highlight of the year for me. I look forward to seeing all my friends because camp is the only time when we can all hang out together. It's always so hard to say goodbye to all your friends, but we keep in touch and always look forward to next year.”

**Maybe reading this article will cause you to think about** whether you might want to take part. Perhaps you could take the whole week off and be a counselor. Or maybe your branch could take one day and attend the camp and introduce the campers to what the Postal Service and letter carriers do six days a week. Many branches provide a barbecue to campers and volunteers. Your national business agent has a list of camp sites and dates in your area, and an updated list is also available online at [nalc.org](http://nalc.org). Click “Community Service,” then “Muscular Dystrophy,” and then “MDA Camps.” Is MDA camp in your future? I hope so!