

A great day at Gold Coast MDA Camp



Jim Williams

Every year, NALC, in conjunction with the Muscular Dystrophy Association, provides NALC branch category winners with a trip to celebrate their success at raising funds for MDA. This year was no exception.

President Fred Rolando and Community and Membership Outreach Coordinator Pam Donato joined me in Florida at the Gold Coast Camp in Lake Worth. With us were representatives from the 11 branch category winners and other letter carriers who came out to support the campers.

Most of our readers probably know about MDA's camping program. For those who do not, the following are a few facts that might answer any questions.

At MDA camp, kids with neuromuscular disease 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 a variety of activities such as horseback riding, swimming, adaptive sports, arts and crafts, camp dances and much more. In addition to all of the fun and friendship 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 as caregiver for a child with neuromuscular 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 camper's siblings.

For NALC, camp provides our volunteers a rare opportunity to connect in ways we might not be able to do any other time in the year. If you have not attended a VIP day at a camp, please try to do so in the future. It is a blast and you will walk away changed.

This year is the celebration of 60 years of MDA camps. The campers range from 7 to 17 years of age and are assigned their own counselor on a one-to-one basis for the week. In addition, medical staff is there to serve the campers. While in Florida, I took the time to talk to the camp nurse, Marjorie, a nurse for 40 years. She was amazed at the kids and how they enjoyed themselves. She also shared that she saw the special bond established between the counselors and campers.

I also met a young woman who is MDA's executive director for South Florida. Her name is Tina Dietrich, and she was serving as the camp director as well. I asked Tina about her motivation for working for MDA. Her story began with the fact that her mother had muscular disease and she knew full well what it was like to grow up in a family where fighting MD was a constant battle.

Tina said that she gains strength from being around the kids and their families. The counselors she works with also develop connections and she was quick to say that they are the reason camp is successful. At the end of our discussion, she told me that no matter what happens in her life, she has learned to never give up by watching kids with MD. They never give up, and neither will she.

As we packed up to leave, all of us were reminded why we work for the Muscular Dystrophy Association. There was a deep sense of joy having served the kids.

Finally, let me give a special shout-out to Geneva Kubal, who really made our visit happen. From preparing the games to scheduling all of the activities, Geneva did all of this with a spirit of service and great humility. Geneva, thank you!



NALC letter carriers recently attended an MDA camp in Lake Worth, FL, to see firsthand how their fundraising efforts help youngsters with muscular dystrophy.