

Double H Hole in the Woods Ranch opens adaptive ski season



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LAKE LUZERNE — While the spotlight shines brightly on the Double H Hole in the Woods Ranch’s summer camps for sick and disabled children, the camp opened for the 15th year of its winter program over the weekend.

“Our adaptive ski program is a very big operation that people just don’t know about ,” said Jacqui Royael, the camp’s director of operations. “And the volunteers are what make it really special.”

Every weekend in January, February and March, Royael and the rest of the staff welcome children and their parents and siblings for a full day of skiing or snowboarding on the camp’s two trails, which features a chairlift and a covered conveyor lift.

During the last 20 summers, the camp has welcomed more than 20,000 children, and even though the winter program has been going for 15 years, staff members like Royael say it’s never received the amount of national publicity the summer program has.

The winter program, which is much smaller, serving 25 children each weekend day, and Linda Smith, who works in the camp’s development office, says the volunteers are the key.

“It’s all run by volunteers,” she said, noting the summer program hires paid staff, while the ski weekends are staffed by 170 volunteers ranging in age from 16 to 70.

“It’s an incredibly giving group,” Smith said. “We start training in October or November, and these folks give up two months of weekends for that, then three months of weekends for the camps. We draw different volunteers for the winter program.”

Most campers come for at least three days during the three-month session. “Sometimes they get more days because we get cancellations,” Smith said. “That’s great, because then you know they are really learning about skiing.”

As important as the campers are, Smith cannot help but focus on the volunteers.

“Whatever else they do in life, whether they are the head of a company or have some other kind of job, it doesn’t have anything to do with what they do in the program,” she said. “The emotion is so strong and becomes part of their lives,” she said.

Smith is especially moved by the teen-agers, including those starting their first season at age 16.

“They are an incredible group of kids who make you think, ‘Wow. There is hope for the future,’ ” she said.

Voice from the top

Max Yurenda, the camp’s CEO/executive director, is equally enthusiastic.

“It’s a unique program. No one does anything like it. It’s the one privatized program in the whole country focused on children with special needs,” Yurenda said. “It’s a beautiful teaching slope, and we have a chalet and places for the children and families to stay.

“People always think we go off site, but we do it all here at the camp, and we have had the Professional Ski Instructors’ Association tell us it’s the best teaching slope in the Northeast.”

Like its summer programs, the adaptive winter sessions are free to campers, and unlike the summer camps, the entire family is welcome to stay. Like during the summer, the winter facilities host children who have been diagnosed with cancer, hemophilia, HIV/AIDS and other similar diseases. The winter program also has openings for campers who are blind or are on the autism spectrum.

The volunteers who teach in the program raised \$10,000 for the conveyor lift, which was open last year, but has been moved slightly and now has a covering, designed to look like Charlie’s Chalet, the warming lodge at the bottom of the hill. Smith pointed out that the expansion of the chalet has resulted in a huge growth in the program over the last four years, and Yurenda says it’s getting even better.

“We do have a two-person chairlift, but that’s never enough, and instructors wind up pushing students up the hill,” Yurenda said. “This is going to make a huge difference.”

The camp has snow guns to make sure there are good skiing conditions, and the 160 volunteer ski instructors have been through rigorous training. The staff to camper ratio is about 2-to-1, and there is 24-hour-a-day medical coverage.

Yurenda said most families are from the local area, but others come from as far as four hours away.

“It’s great, because while the campers are getting their instruction, the families can be doing alpine skiing, cross-country or snowshoeing,” Yurenda said.

Campers are provided with all the equipment they need, including helmets, skis or snowboards. There is a variety of adaptive ski equipment for those who cannot use standard skis. Campers are also able to snowshoe and snowboard.

“The snowboarding is becoming really popular,” Yurenda said. “The kids are just loving it.”

‘All excited’

Royael says a camper’s day starts at 9 a.m., when he or she arrives at the camp with parents and sometimes with siblings.

“They get all excited, because they want to see who their instructor is for the day,” Royael said, explaining the goal is for at least two instructors for each camper, depending on the camper’s needs. We meet the child where they are and give them what they need.”

Royael said the lifts are open from 10 a.m. to noon and from 1 p.m. to 3 p.m., with an hour’s lunch in between. “When the lifts close, they are totally exhausted.”

The camp has skis that fit any kind of disability, including single-skis, sit-down skis, standing skis, slides and tethers. “No matter what the physical issue is, our goal is to have an instructor and equipment to help the child ski effectively.”

While Royael is focused with what is happening on the slope, she cannot help but look over at the parents.

“Watching the parents is a great time,” she said. “They’ll sit in the chalet with their computers or have coffee by the fire,” she said. “Then you will see them cheering at the bottom of the hill.

“You can just feel the pride when they see their children come down the hill.”

