

Longtime Children's Beach House art teacher Connie Marshall-Miller talks through the nuances of sunlight filtering through Delaware Bay's shallow waters as campers share their suggestions for a collaborative project.

NURTURE AMID NATURE

Since the 1930s, Children's Beach House has been preparing special-needs campers for successful lives

BY CHRIS BEAKEY | PHOTOGRAPHS BY CAROLYN WATSON

Zykai Vester is graduating this month from Sussex Technical High School with a series of acting and singing roles in local productions to his credit and plans to become a math teacher, thanks to his award-winning numerical skills. Although he's quick to acknowledge his family and teachers for their support toward his achievements, Zykai's especially grateful for more than 10 years of rewarding experiences during summer and weekend camps at Children's Beach House, located on the Delaware Bay in Lewes.

"I remember being so nervous coming here as a child," he recalls during a lunch break at a winter camp. "Being here overnight away from home was especially challenging, but the more people I met, the better it got."

When asked for more details, the young man describes how the camp's vibrant arts program, organized games, and community service and job-readiness activities helped him build social skills. He also recalls the fun he had watching "Elf: The Musical" at Clear Space Theatre with fellow

campers and enjoying meals prepared by Paula Baker, the beach house's resident chef.

At which point camp coordinator Jonathan Freeman-Coppadge chimes in: "Don't forget discussing existentialism at the dinner table last month. You also seemed to enjoy that."

"Right," Zykai acknowledges. "There was a huge discussion about that and about perspectivism and about how absurd life is when you have to make sense of stuff that doesn't make sense."

That response draws a smile from Freeman-Coppadge, who freely admits that a lot of the discussion was a bit over his own head. It also points to a uniquely wonderful irony about CBH campers. All of the participants, ages 7 to 17, who attend have some type of speech, language or hearing delay. Yet thanks to the counselors' focus on strengths as opposed to challenges, days at camp are mostly about happy people celebrating their esprit de corps while tapping their own unique talents en route to promising futures. ▶





A cooperative game under a sunny sky fosters the sense of teamwork shared by Children's Beach House campers.

Help for the 'different' child

Children's Beach House Executive Director Rich Garrett could have thrived as a camper if he'd had the chance to attend.

"I was one of those kids with a speech problem and an under-resourced family and someone who was bullied all the way up until seventh grade," he says. Yet decades later he's proud to describe how he earned a bachelor's degree in psychology and served as the dean of students at Williamson College of the Trades in Media, Pa., and as the executive director of another nonprofit prior to joining the Children's Beach House team in 2003.

He credits several factors in the trajectory of his success, including supportive siblings, access to highly qualified speech therapists, and peers and adults who nurtured him through the same "positive youth development" practices that drive the CBH camp experience.

"We know from research that one of the best ways to protect kids from risks is to surround them with positive peer group experiences and support from non-parental adults," he says.

In simple terms, that means collaborating with the educators who are implementing individual education programs (IEPs) for campers facing learning challenges; involving kids'

families; and, when needed, working alongside social service professionals who help chart a course for each camper's success. As a result, a variety of people work together to support positive outcomes for participants year-round.

This multifaceted approach is essential, Garrett says, because children who are seen as "different" tend to be more isolated at school and more vulnerable to bullying, risky behaviors, and dropping out of school. That's a special problem in Delaware, he notes, because about 7 percent of the state's kids and teens have a communicative problem related to speech, language processing, or hearing.

One benefit of Garrett's long tenure is his front row seat to so many success stories. Virtually all of the campers he's known over the years have gone on to graduate from high school. Some have become mentors to other kids as counselors at the beach house or, in Zykai Vester's case, as a counselor at the Sussex Family YMCA summer camp last year near Rehoboth.

It's a job Zykai loved because he enjoys being a leader and helping other kids form meaningful human connections.

"One of the best things about the beach house is that it helped me grow in ways that I wouldn't have otherwise and [helped me] make more friends," he says. "All these years later we're still friends, like brothers and sisters who have each other's backs." ▶

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Pathways to growth

Educators have a range of ways to support kids and teens who struggle to communicate. Veteran actor Trudy Graboyes likes to welcome them to the stage.

That's what's happening on a muggy August morning last year as she takes on the role of a journalist interviewing campers describing life on their alien planets. There's no script, just a lot of probing questions that urge the campers who are playing "the aliens" to reveal the mysteries of their existence to everyday people with the help of a translator, played by another camper.

If you're the camper playing the role of the alien, you start off by simply answering questions with "yes" or "no" in an alien language, conveyed by the translator. It's an easy icebreaker. But then the questions become more complex, requiring fuller answers and more engagement with the interviewer.

"The alien actually has to make up a language that the translator translates, with each of them using their own creativity, which is a lot of fun for everyone," Graboyes explains.

Zykai and some of the other participants take to the stage like real pros, with polished and emphatic performances that show no signs of insecurity. Others warm to their roles gradually, becoming more physically demonstrative and slipping deeper into character to answer the questions. As a result, the exercise is less about putting on fabulous performances and more about engaging in fun conversations.

In another exercise, Graboyes shows the campers a Norman Rockwell painting and asks them to tell her what's happening in it. Again, the activity is largely a discussion, but it sometimes progresses to the point where campers take on the roles of people in the painting and create an impromptu one-act play.

"It's all about storytelling as a way to bring about engagement," Graboyes says. "What's intriguing to me as a teacher is the different ways kids learn. Confidence is everything, and this is a good way to build it."

Creativity continues the conversation

Down a bright, airy hallway, Connie Marshall-Miller, who taught at Cape Henlopen High School for 17 years,

leads art courses that also strengthen interpersonal skills. It happens in a bright room with Delaware Bay views and decorated with remnants from the organization's gala fundraising events, including papier-mache fish from "A Night Under the Sea," dazzling ruby-red slippers from "A Night in Oz," and giant wheels from "A Bicycle Built for Two." Mixed in all around are scores of paintings and drawings and ceramics created by campers.

"It's therapeutic for kids to work with their hands, which builds motor skills," Marshall-Miller says. "Clay is especially appealing because it's a three-dimensional activity as opposed to drawing on a flat surface. I've worked with kids who wouldn't touch it at first but who eventually really came out of their shells."

She adds: "We also have kids who excel in drawing and painting. Ultimately these arts experiences give people a way to communicate that isn't verbal, but can often help them become more verbal. The growth among kids who are with us until they age out [upon graduating from high school] can be wonderful — we have some kids who can't wait to get here mainly for the art program."

Unfortunately, the continuity that she and other CBH staffers find crucial suffered greatly when the COVID pandemic forced the cancellation of camp activities.

"The two years we weren't here in person were really sad," Marshall-Miller recalls, but she then describes happy memories from before and after that time. "I kept thinking about a little girl who hardly spoke and wouldn't even touch the clay but who eventually became more talkative, and two little boys who used to sing 'Happy' in class every day — two 7-year-old singing brothers who were a delight all the way through.

"I missed them all so much and was so glad when one class came back. It was as good for me as it was for them."

Big nights out are a must

If your memory is jogged by the description of those papier-mache fish, ruby slippers and outsized bicycle wheels in the art studio, chances are it's because you've been to some of the highly popular special events held in the beach house's large public spaces. ►

A Long History of Helping

When Connie Marshall-Miller leads art classes at Children's Beach House, it's with fond memories of attending kindergarten at the beloved landmark on Delaware Bay, which was then surrounded by geraniums grown by her grandfather, Joe Marshall, for CBH founder Lydia Chichester du Pont.

Then, as now, the beach house welcomed young Connie and other typically developing kids into its early education activities alongside those facing developmental challenges. Its Lewes Beach setting, replete with fresh air and maritime recreational opportunities, was cherished by du Pont because of the healing qualities she experienced during summer visits to the area as a child with orthopedic ailments.

It was an auspicious time — the 1930s — given the wealth and influence of the du Pont family and Lydia's focus on abilities as opposed to disabilities. Her perspective was undoubtedly also shaped by her travels to Venezuela, Africa and other faraway places despite her physical challenges. She wanted children to experience a fun vacation at the beach, with playful and educational activities that advanced their recuperation and development.

The original building was constructed shortly after du Pont purchased land on Lewes Beach in 1938. It was designed by Samuel Eldon Homsey and Victorine du Pont Homsey, who together operated one of the nation's first architectural firms founded by married partners. In 1947 CBH became one of the very few institutions

welcoming Delaware children of all races, and focused primarily on serving children with cerebral palsy, post-encephalitis ailments, speech and hearing disabilities, and the aftermath of infantile paralysis.

In response to evolving needs, the organization in 1955 shifted its primary focus to children facing speech and hearing challenges. While the building was esteemed by local residents and beach house campers, it eventually became obsolete to the needs of its mission and was replaced in 2000.

Today's facility is perfectly at home in Lewes with its cedar-shake exterior and airy central room with a large fireplace and a circular stairway that evokes those in the World War II-era observation towers on nearby beaches. It also retains its value as a beloved local institution



Lydia Chichester du Pont

filled with young people who learn, play and explore during preschool activities and summer and weekend camps, and as an architecturally appealing venue for some of the region's most popular galas and special events. ■



In this 1956 photo, campers interact with military personnel at Fort Miles, during a time when children with orthopedic ailments shared summer fun alongside typically developing kids.



Zykai Vester, left, and fellow Children's Beach House campers use multiple colors to capture scenes from Lewes Beach just outside the large picture windows of the art room.

Many are galas put on by staff to raise money for various programs, with live music, grand decorations, and gourmet foods setting the stage for glittery dresses, tuxes and costumes tied to colorful themes. Organizers say local residents love these big nights out, especially because they're supporting a great cause.

"We have an endowment that gives us 5 or 6 percent of our budget and have about 30 percent of our budget paid for [through grants and government funding] overall, but we have to raise the rest," Garrett says.

A major boost toward that goal came in 2021 when the organization unveiled its Greater Good Initiative, which creates special events at the beach house and other locations. Led by Meg Gardner (who, with her husband, Lion, co-owned and greatly revamped the heralded Blue Moon restaurant in Rehoboth) and Executive Chef Dom Pandolfino (who expanded the Blue Moon's catering function), the team conceives and holds events of all types, including cocktail and engagement parties, clam bakes, weddings, birthday parties and other upscale — and down-home-style — events.

The beach house's expansive and beautifully decorated rooms, or its grounds, can handle up to 150 people, but the organization also accommodates up to 500 for events at other locations. All proceeds go to CBH programs serving children, families and communities statewide.

Expanding educational opportunities

Entrepreneurial thinking on the financial front has coincided with the beach house's connection to a wider group of children through high-quality preschool at CBH's Margaret H. Rollins Development Center, which also overlooks Delaware Bay.

Since 2015 the center has served children who are developing typically alongside those with speech and language delays, hearing impairments, and/or orthopedic challenges. One benefit for the beach house is the opportunity to build crucial foundational skills for 3- and 4-year-old children who might become future campers. For local parents, the program can be a godsend given the shortage of preschool slots in Sussex County, and because of the cost, which is well below that of private preschool (more than \$10,000 a year, on average) in Delaware.

The program has virtually everything that well-informed parents want, including small classroom sizes with a 1-to-5 adult-to-child ratio, individualized instruction in a language-rich environment, and a top rating from the Delaware Stars for Early Success initiative, which monitors preschool programs around the state. Since the program is currently only able to serve about 38 kids annually, it's common for parents to get on the waiting list when their children are infants.

For Josiah Taylor, teaching preschool there is a dream job built around what he sees as a model approach.

"I love the way the program prepares kids with differing abilities to succeed," he says during a break while the youngsters enjoy a healthy lunch prepared by the facility's culinary team. "The social-emotional elements are especially important because we're modeling the way people treat each other. It's pretty common when kids feel sad or anxious after being dropped off by their parents to see other kids going over to comfort them."

Equally important, he says, is the academic foundation that children develop in the program, and the sense of resilience that prepares them for future challenges.

"A lot of the kids develop strong literacy skills that give them a great start in kindergarten. They also learn a lot through creative play and through our location here at the beach — just think about going outside and seeing a mother turtle cover up her eggs. They've even told me things about the ocean that I didn't know."



Thomas McClain, left, and fellow Children's Beach House campers, do some stretching to warm up for an improvisational drama lesson, an exercise that fosters communication and confidence.

Zykai and fellow camper Thomas McClain also speak eloquently about the value of the beach and the bay for inspiring a sense of adventure and a happy overall vibe.

"I started coming here when I was 8 and have loved swimming more than anything else," Thomas says during a discussion of his own college plans. "It was just so nice having the beach out there."

"I also love the bonfires on the beach," Zykai adds.

After more than a decade of great Children's Beach House experiences, both teens are confident in their social skills as they make plans for college. Yet both still have vivid memories of their

less assured early days and a yearning to see more kids given the opportunity to attend, particularly if they're struggling to make good interpersonal connections.

"My opinion is to give it a try," Thomas says. "If you're going through something, everyone here will help you, and I know you're going to make good friends. I really hope to send my own kids here so they can have the experiences I've had. I feel that dearly in my heart." ■

Chris Beakey writes from his home in Lewes. His most recent novel is "Fatal Option," published by Simon & Schuster.

The social-emotional elements are especially important because we're modeling the way people treat each other.

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