

NSSRA participants, families cherish program



Miguel Lara gets a basketball painted on his arm during the NSSRA Summer Bash on Aug. 16 at Techny Prairie Park and Field. Carlos Alvarez/22nd Century Media

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3:47 pm CDT August 21, 2017

David Stuart and Izzy Hilding did not let rain stop them from having fun with their friends and dancing to the music.

They were among nearly 400 supporters of the Northern Suburban Special Recreation Association (NSSRA) who signed up for its 2017 end of summer celebration bash on Aug. 16 at the Northbrook Park District's Techny Prairie Park and Field.

Mother Nature turned off the rain after about an hour, allowing guests to leave the tent area and take advantage of the activities around the park.

"We are so excited to host this event and that the rain has subsided," said Molly Hamer, executive director of the Northbrook Park District. "NSSRA is a great organization and this park is a lovely place for these activities."

In addition to the band for dancing, there were old-fashioned, but still modern games like hula hoops, softball and bean toss. The latter attracted a father-son duo.

"Look dad," called Troy Grospitz Junior, 6, to his father, Troy [Grospitz] senior. "I put five bean bags in the hole."

Inside the huge tent, guests were getting reacquainted. Some were families whose children or siblings participate in NSSRA activities.

Hot dogs, hamburgers, salads and ice cream were there for the hungry.

“This is our major social event of the year,” said Craig Culp, executive director of the NSSRA. “We invite everyone. No one has to pay but of course, we accept donations.”

Culp was like a proud uncle whose NSSRA program participants were obviously happy to see him. There were continuous hellos, handshakes and high-fives going back and forth.

NSSRA provides year-round recreational program for children, teens and adults with disabilities in 13 communities. Ten of them are area park districts—Deerfield, Glencoe, Glenview, Highland Park, Kenilworth, Lake Bluff, Northbrook, Northfield, Wilmette, Winnetka; two cities: Lake Forest and Highwood and one village, Riverwoods.

“We have 600 programs that someone can join or in a partner agency with one of our companions,” Culp said. “We believe that everyone should try something new.”

One of NSSRA’s members is Mikey Hull, a participant in the organization’s programs for about 10 years.

“Mikey will be attending our Camp Wigwam for adults in Maine for the first time,” Culp said. “He will be one of 15 adults going with five staff members. Mikey will stay in a cabin and participate in the same things other campers do. We also have camps for children and teens.”

Hull was with his friends and long-time NSSRA participants Bill Fisher and Randy Huffmaster of Highland Park. They stopped by to say hello to Culp before playing softball. The three men recently received medals in deadlifts and bench press.

Culp proudly states that NSSRA is the first such recreational organization for those with disabilities in Illinois.

“We are probably the first in the world,” he said. “There now are 33 similar special recreation associations in the state.”

The NSSRA had its beginning in 1970, subsidized by a portion of park district tax levies from property taxes but there is a cap on those funds.

“The NSSRA is a bright spot in Illinois and does not get the recognition it should,” stated Mitch Slotnick, Ph.D., one of three founders in 1997 of the NSSRA Foundation. “We want the organization to remain viable and strong. Look at the good it does and is a good use of taxpayers’ money.”

Rita Pigott and Julie Sanders are the other two founders of NSSRA Foundation.

“NSSRA is a unique organization,” Slotnick said, whose son, Jay, is a program participant and gold medal swimmer. “When a person with a disability gets out of high school where do they go? With NSSRA, they get to socialize, interact with friends. They are included in activities and not excluded. Years ago a person with Downs usually only lived to their 20s. Now modern medicine is extending their lives to an average life expectancy in the 60s. The need continues. Look at autism rates. They are growing by leaps.”

Culp added that the Foundation enabled NSSRA to buy vehicles to transport people and last year provided about \$46,000 in scholarships to participants in its programs.

Just then almost on cue Stuart and Hilding came back to talk again with Culp.

“I could not participate in its programs without the financial help,” Stuart said. “I like the friends I meet at the social club,” Hilding said. “It keeps a smile on my face.”