

15 MINUTES

Boat trip a welcomed rarity for disabled students

Kind sailor gives kids and parents a special day on the water

BY EVAN WILLIAMS
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Bella Demaio, 17, and Colin Iehle, 18, enjoyed one of Southwest Florida's most sought after activities - a boat ride on a gorgeous day - as much as any vibrant teenagers.

But Demaio is managing Down's syndrome, and Iehle contends with Pervasive Developmental Delay, a form of Cerebral Palsy. So the boating excursion they took last Saturday was a rarity for them; a short but welcome respite from the enormous, everyday challenges of living.

The trip was due to a good natured conspiracy between local massage therapist Pete Campo, the Iona McGregor Fire District, the Fort Myers Boat Club and Buckingham Exceptional Student Center. It was Campo's third trip on his pontoon boat with disabled children.

"As much as it's for the kids, it's for the parents," he said. "Just that we show them we care, recognize the hardship that they have... It's just like a band-aid. There's nothing wrong with band aids - they help to heal."

Bella's mother Patricia and Colin's father, Norman, went along for the ride, which started at the Boat Club.

"We don't get the opportunity to go to a

lot of social events, so this is great," Patricia Demaio said. She has worked with disabled children in Sarasota and said Colin, who can't speak normally, can understand more than you think; he communicates a lot through touch.

Campo got everyone aboard and motored out onto the Caloosahatchee River, followed by the Iona Fire Department's new, state-of-the-art fireboat - for fun, and as a safety measure.

"I measured the risk," Campo said. "And the opportunity to have some fun. Here's a kid whose whole life he saw the inside of his house, the transportation bus and the inside of his school. No one can ever take this away from this kid."

The firemen flashed their lights and honked. And, to the delighted clapping and cheering of all aboard, they showed off the vessel's powerful hosing capabilities, almost sprinkling traffic on the Cape Coral Bridge.

"They're a great bunch of guys," Campo said. "Today they come out for an event like this and tomorrow they could be running into burning buildings. All in a days work."

A Lee County Sheriff Helicopter joined the party briefly, diving in for a couple of fly bys. (The co-pilot in the chopper, Casey Bradford, happened to be a full-time Iona firefighter who is also a Reserve Sheriff's officer.)

As the ride progressed a Pelican was spotted. Campo steered into the back alley waterways of Gulf Harbour Yacht & Country Club and out again. The parents found they were both from Long Island, N.Y. and happen to be vegetarians. The Iehles live in San Carlos

Park; the Demaios in Estero.

"(Colin) knows Bella really well," Norman Iehle said. "They're in the same class."

That's a class at Buckingham Exceptional Student Center, where principal Bill Elkin helped Campo find students to take for a boat ride. Campo said he plans to take more students from the school, or other children with disabilities.

Veronica Demaio, 21, who is home on break from college and the youngest of Bella's four older sisters, was also aboard. She got into an innertoo with her sister and Campo pulled them behind the boat for a while. Later, Bella and Colin took turns steering.

"I think (Bella) had a great time," Veronica Demaio said. "She was laughing and yelling on the tube, telling everyone to go faster."

The members of the Boat Club, the families, Campo, the fire department, and a Florida Weekly reporter all got together for a grill out after the boat ride. The kids played on the fire truck and everyone took pictures.

Firefighter Ed Steffens said he also had fun. "This is a brand new boat. I love it. It



FLORIDA WEEKLY PHOTO EVAN WILLIAMS

Patricia, Bella, Colin, Norman aboard Pete Campo's boat with a Iona Fire Department's new fireboat in the background.

was a blast."

General Contractor & Broker Salesperson for the Boat Club, Patrick Ruff, flipped burgers and was humbled by how simply this effort created a few hours of happiness for all involved. "When you grow up on the water in Naples, on a Boston Whaler, without your shirt on, you take it for granted," he said. "There are so many hard things in life - this is easy."

Pete Campo, with the Iona McGregor Fire District and the Fort Myers Boat Club, is planning regular boat rides for children with disabilities. For more information, call Campo at (239) 823-4228 or e-mail him at Pac1053@aol.com. ■

ADVERTORIAL

PAY FOR COLLEGE WITHOUT GOING BROKE

A Fort Myers man teaches free workshops to help parents save thousands in process.

Fort Myers-Lee County parents that are planning on sending a child to college in the next few years, but aren't quite sure how to pay for it can now rest a little easier.

Stephen Finlay of College Planning Experts has been educating parents in the community about what to do if they haven't saved enough for college.

It's really sad, but most parents that we talk to have done real well financially, but never found time to save for college,

and now they're facing a bill of \$18,000-\$45,000 a year, and they don't know who to turn to," he says. "Further, most of the time, all they hear is to not even bother applying for any aid because they make too much money. However, most of the time, that is simply not true... Even if they make a six-figure income.

Simply put, we show parents the truth that they aren't hearing anywhere else about how the college process really works, and how they can get their child into a top school easily, help that student pick a career that will suit them and pay them well and save thousands of dollars in the process."

In June, Lee County parents will have three opportunities to hear Stephen speak. He is teaching his class "How to Give Your Kid a 4-Year College Education... without going broke!" On Wednesday the 4th of June at the EastCounty Library 881 Gunnery Rd Lehigh Acres (7:00 p.m.-8:15 p.m.) Tuesday the 10th of June at the Waikie Hatchee Rec Center 16760 Bass Rd. Ft. Myers (7:00 p.m.-8:15 p.m.) And on Thursday the 12th of June at the Estero Rec Center 9200 Corkscrew Blvd Ft. Myers (6:30 p.m.-7:45 p.m.) We'll discuss everything from the greatest myths about the college process, to how to send your student to a fancy private school for less than the cost of a Junior College... it'll be like learning how to get a brand new Lexus for the price of a used pick up." He grins.

Topics will also include why private scholarships and 529 plans are a waste of time, how to double or even triple the amount of free money you receive from each school, and avoid the ONE mistake that will KILL your chances of getting any money. They will learn a ton, and I do my best to make the class fun.

Don't forget the class is totally free, but the seats are limited. You can reserve a seat by calling 239.848.6689

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