

Teen volunteers build friendships through Citizen Advocates

Making a positive difference in people's lives through food, fun and games for youths

By Jill Badzinski

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A monthly respite program focuses on developing relationships between children with disabilities, their siblings and the middle- and high-school students who voluntarily interact with them.

“This is unique because it isn't a babysitting program,” said Jessica Frederick, executive director of Citizen Advocates, which runs the program. “We bring kids together and help them build relationships and see what they have in common rather than what makes them different.”

On Saturday, about a dozen youths with disabilities spent three hours interacting with about two dozen volunteers from schools in Washington County and beyond, including 10 from Marquette University High School in Milwaukee. They started out taking advantage of seasonably warm weather outside before heading in for dinner and additional activities, including blocks, crafts and games in the school gym.

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The relationship-building component of the program makes it one of a kind in Washington County.

“We stress social interaction and providing opportunities from the kids to learn from each other,” Frederick said.

Devin Henke, 16, of Germantown volunteered for his second Respite program.

“It's pretty fun,” he said. “It's important to volunteer and with this, I learn to be open to everything and to be patient. It's good to learn how to interact with kids with disabilities and to get to become friends with them.”

Abby Frederick, 14, is a frequent volunteer at the Respite program, and pairs each time with different children.

“It's fun to hang out and get to know all of the kids,” she said. “We always do different things, but we always have fun.”

On Saturday, Frederick, a West Bend East High School freshman, spent time with Ben Repinski, who showed her how he uses a voice synthesizer.

“I always look forward to this,” she said.

She's not alone. Another unique aspect of the Respite program is it draws more volunteers than children with disabilities.

“We are very fortunate to have so many great youth volunteers,” Jessica Frederick said. “They really embrace the chance to spend time with the other kids, and they take it very seriously.”

Citizen Advocates is a nonprofit organization with a goal of making a positive difference in the lives of people with disabilities. In addition to the monthly youth respite program at Silverbrook Intermediate School, Citizen Advocates holds CA Core events for community members of all abilities who are at least 18 as well as school-based programs for people under 18.

Dancing for a Difference, Citizen Advocates' largest fundraiser, will be held from 5 p.m. to 11 p.m. May 11 at the Chandelier Ballroom in Hartford. Community participants have been working with Fred Astaire dance instructors to win trophies.

For additional information on attending the event, seeing who is participating and buying votes, visit www.cawash.org.

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– **Jessica Frederick,**

executive director of Citizen Advocates



Abby Frederick, left, watches as Ben Repinski shows her highlights of a voice synthesizer application during a Respite program at Silverbrook Intermediate School Saturday.

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