



Santa Maria Times

Saturday, December 24, 2005

Lee Central Coast Newspapers

Way to Go

Nonprofit group takes clients in New Directions

by Emily Welly

Robin Scheff could hardly wait for her holiday trip to Disneyland. She had never been there before, and on this trip she would be surrounded by friends and sent off by Santa Claus himself. A trip to Disneyland would be great anytime, but at the holidays it's especially important for Scheff, a resident of La Paloma group home in Lompoc, who might otherwise be left alone.

"She's so excited," said Jennifer Swartz, who runs La Paloma. "She can't wait."

Scheff wasn't the only representative from La Paloma at Disneyland this year. Another resident, who cannot be named due to privacy reasons, also attended as a guest, and Swartz and a friend attended as tour guides. Additionally, other local travelers - from Arroyo Grande, Morro Bay and San Luis Obispo - attended.

The trip was hosted by New Directions, a nonprofit organization dedicated to taking people with special needs on vacation. New Directions started with just holiday trips for people who would otherwise be left alone during the holiday season. That project morphed into the company's "Holiday Happiness" program, which includes trips to San Francisco, Disneyland and Hawaii, depending upon where the travelers live and what they can afford.

Scheff's La Paloma companion has been attending New Directions trips two to three times a year for the past 10 to 15 years, said Swartz. She had her suitcase packed for Disneyland more than a week in advance of the trip.

Swartz herself began touring with the group last Thanksgiving, sometimes with her clients, and sometimes without. "They get the best of the best," she said. "They aren't denied anything."

Dee Duncan, the organization's founder and executive director, started New Directions in 1985. She previously worked at the Devereux Foundation, a residential treatment program in Santa Barbara. As part of her job there, she arranged vacations for residents. Her efforts were very successful, she said. It was "the most beneficial (program) we had, I thought," said Duncan.

In 1985, Duncan retired from Devereux and, with Devereux's blessing, opened New Directions. She put the \$12,000 she had saved in her retirement fund into the venture, and opened it to both her client base at Devereaux and others. "I really didn't know how it would take off," said Duncan. "We're still here, 20 years later."

Indeed. Twenty years later, New Directions has taken more than 7,000 people



LOVARC Facility Coordinator Jennifer Swartz, right, who runs La Paloma group home, brushes resident Robin Scheff's hair Dec. 16 to get ready for their Family Christmas Party. The two are going to Disneyland together for "Holiday Happiness," a program through New Directions. In the photos below, for the past 15 years, the Marriott hotel in Anaheim has adopted about half of the Disneyland travelers, providing gifts that Santa passes out Christmas morning. Tina Larkin-Staff

on trips all over the world.

While Duncan has a special place in her heart for New Directions' Holiday Happiness program, the organization does not allocate all of its resources to that program. The group also organizes up to five vacations per month all year round for travelers. Las Vegas, Hawaii, Europe, Australia - "We've been all over the world," said Duncan. Upcoming 2006 tours include trips to Baja California, Phoenix for baseball spring training, Universal Studios theme park, Las Vegas, Lake Tahoe, San Diego, Waikiki, an Arizona dude ranch and Acapulco.

According to Duncan, New Direction's overall goal is to promote acceptance and inclusion of people with brain impairments into mainstream life, "in the real world, doing real world things." On vacation, the travelers are exposed to hands-on learning, have a chance to socialize and pick up some independent living skills.

The program means a lot to the travelers, according to La Paloma's Swartz, who has seen its effect on her residents. "She's so much different outside the house than

inside the house,” Swartz said of her frequent-traveler resident. For example, the La Paloma staff usually has to beg her to dance at events with music. On vacations like this month’s Disneyland trip, she just starts dancing when she hears music.

Swartz remembers other moments on past trips, such as when she started a pillow fight with her. “I didn’t know she knew what a pillow fight was,” Swartz laughed. She also woke up at 2 a.m. in the middle of a trip once, bright-eyed and ready to watch some television.

Another of Swartz’ residents goes on a trip to a dude ranch every year with New Directions. In all, four of La Paloma’s six residents have been on tours with the company. “They have so much fun,” said Swartz. “They get so excited when (New Directions) pamphlets come in the mail, they fight over them.” Several of Swartz’ staff members have joined the tours, too. “I think what Dee started was a wonderful thing,” said Swartz.

In addition to group homes like La Paloma, travelers come from mental hospitals, institutions, convalescent homes, residential facilities or their families’ private homes. They have mild to severe physical and mental disabilities such as mental retardation, cerebral palsy, Down Syndrome, autism, schizophrenia, blindness and hearing impairments. “The thing they all have in common is they really need a vacation,” said Duncan.

And they want to go with their friends, she added.

Each tour is customized for travelers with brain impairments. The tours are targeted at travelers who are teenagers and older, although children without families are welcome in the Holiday Happiness program, which has catered to travelers ranging from 7 to 93 years old. “Holiday Happiness is the most important part for me,” said Duncan. While she worked at Devereux, she witnessed what it was like for many people to be left on the campus when the majority of patients and staff members went home for the holidays. There, she said, maybe 10 residents out of 200 would be left. The campus felt like a “ghost town,” said Duncan, and during the holidays - already an emotional time - residents’ stress was compounded.

Duncan came up with what she thought was a simple solution. “That is just to take them somewhere, too,” she said. The first Holiday Happiness trip Duncan led was to Zaka Lake. The atmosphere provided a cozy, Christmas-like place for the 12 Devereux residents whom Duncan gathered to take to the lake. When the Holiday Happiness program grew to more than 50 travelers, a change in destination was necessary. “We outgrew Zaka Lake,” said Duncan.

Disneyland became the holiday destination of choice for New Directions travelers, an easy pick for Duncan, who knew it was one of the only places open on Christmas Day. The destination is still the most popular for Christmas. This year, Scheff’s four-day trip (Dec. 19 to 22) to Disneyland was the most crowded. In all, 48 guests attended, accompanied by 21 volunteer staff members. The group was divided in half to make for easier management.

An additional 15 travelers from northern California are visiting San Francisco from Dec. 23 to 26. A group of 19 travelers, along with a six-person staff, headed to Hawaii for a weeklong trip (Dec. 21 to 27) through the Holiday Happiness program. This trip, which costs \$3,100 per traveler (versus \$900 per traveler for Disneyland or San Francisco), will be paid for by most of the travelers themselves, according to Duncan.

Surprisingly, many adults who do not have family involvement - perhaps their parents are elderly or have passed away - actually do have money saved up because they very rarely use what they save on anything, said Duncan. They may receive benefits or work for minimum wage, and the proceeds add up. “We could fill these tours just with people who could pay,” said Duncan. However, the organization saves half the space on its trips for people on scholarship, who otherwise would not be able to afford the experience.

One organization, “Angels Bearing Gifts” provides travel scholarships to New Directions travelers. The group was founded by a former board member of New Directions. And this year, the Carl W. Johnson Foundation pledged \$10,000 per year for scholarships for Holiday Happiness, which will increase greatly the number of travelers the program can accommodate

each year, said Duncan. “The only limit is money,” Duncan added. Rooms at the Marriott in Anaheim are donated by the hotel chain, and for the past 15 years, Marriott has also adopted about half of the travelers in attendance, providing the gifts that Santa passes out on Christmas morning.

Many others from the community have also been generous toward the program, said Duncan. One family, for example, makes it their annual Christmas project to provide gifts for five adopted travelers. The family (like the Marriott) receives a wish list for each traveler they adopt and purchases the gifts on their wish lists for them. “They don’t expect much, so they don’t ask for much,” said Duncan. Indeed, the lists are made up of simple items: bedroom slippers, a book, tennis shoes, an umbrella, a sweatshirt, a Dodgers hat, a picture frame, art supplies and a soap dish. (*See below for details on adopting a traveler.*)

This year, travelers also received their own stockings, which were hand-decorated by Santa Barbara high school student Katie Washburn, said Duncan. Those efforts mean a lot to the travelers, and a lot to Duncan, who knows how appreciative her travelers are. “For some, it’s the only time they leave their facility all year,” she said.

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Next year, adopt a traveler

To adopt a New Directions Holiday Happiness traveler, contact New Directions at 805-967-2841 or hello@newdirectionstravel.org. Prior to the holiday trip, you will receive a wish list for a specific traveler and be given the task of purchasing and gift-wrapping the items on the list. In return, you will receive a photo of your traveler on his or her trip.

“They’re just so appreciative,” said Dee Duncan, founder and executive director of New Directions.

Visit www.NewDirectionsTravel.org for more information.