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A whole new world: New Directions takes the developmentally disabled to Disneyland and faraway places



New Directions' vacation tours include Hawaii, where a group has gone for a Wakiki Christmas. From left in this 2004 photo are tour guide Bill Tover of Carpinteria, Glendora client David, Los Gatos client Max, tour guide David McKeand of Santa Barbara and Dallas client John.

by Dave Mason, News-Press Staff Writer
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A dolphin opened up the world for a man who wouldn't talk.

"We had one fellow who was nonverbal," said Dee Duncan, executive director of New Directions, a Santa Barbara nonprofit corporation that arranges travel tours for people with developmental disabilities. The man went with New Directions to Hawaii, where he got to swim with a dolphin.

"I don't know what it was all about, but he began to speak soon afterward," Ms. Duncan said.

Traveling gives New Directions clients, who

vary from their early 20s to their 80s, a sense of confidence, Ms. Duncan said. Their journeys continued this month through the Holiday Happiness Program.

To celebrate Christmas, 50 clients and 23 tour guides went on a Disneyland trip Friday through Monday. Half were from Santa Barbara County, and the rest from Ventura and Los Angeles counties and Northern California. On the same days, another 20 clients from Santa Barbara, Ventura, Los Angeles and San Diego counties participated in a San Diego tour, which had 10 tour guides.

And 13 clients from Northern California and two from Santa Barbara County are in San Francisco for a tour that is scheduled to take them on a boat under the Golden Gate Bridge.

They went to the city Dec. 23 and are scheduled to return Friday. During the same period, 16 California clients are in Hawaii for a Waikiki Christmas; half are from Santa Barbara County.

If not for New Directions' tours, the clients would be staying home, and many don't have families with which to spend Christmas, Ms. Duncan said.

Robert is one of them. (New Directions requested that its clients' last names not be published.)

Without the annual holiday tour, the 66-year-old Santa Barbara resident said he would spend his time

alone watching TV. "That's why I appreciate New Directions. I don't have any family; my friends are married. I'm an old bachelor."

Ms. Duncan smiled as she listened to Robert. "We'll see if we can fix that," she said as she kidded Robert about his single status. She affectionately teased him and other clients, who gathered on a recent day at the New Directions office in Santa Barbara.

And they teased her back.

Thomas, 49, of Goleta said last weekend marked his fifth trip with New Directions to Disneyland. "My favorite ride is It's A Small World. I get that song stuck in my head!" He laughed loudly and had a big smile.

Robert, who also went to Disneyland, has been going there with New Directions for 10 years. A fan of the park's parades and It's A Small World, he said he appreciates the theme park more as an adult than he did as a kid.

"It makes me feel happy," said the soft-spoken man with a gentle smile.

Like Robert, some have traveled with New Directions for years. In addition to the holiday tour, New Directions arranges travel tours the rest of the year to places as diverse as Seattle, New York City and Las Vegas.

"We've been all over," Ms. Duncan said. "Australia, Tahiti, all over Europe, Hong Kong, Fiji."

In all, New Directions takes 550 clients a year to places all over the world.

The clients' conditions include

autism, Down syndrome, cerebral palsy and head injuries.

"They (the tours) are for anyone whose cognitive skills wouldn't keep up with regular tour schedules. Travel has been an area that has been off-limits to them," Ms. Duncan said.

"They don't get to go on trips with their families. It was unspoken: 'You don't get to go because you have brain damage.'"

The trips transform the clients, Ms. Duncan said. "Their image of themselves is greatly expanded."

Going to Disneyland or Hawaii for Christmas can mean everything to them, Ms. Duncan said.



STEVE MALONE / NEWS-PRESS PHOTO

Executive Director Dee Duncan, left, spends time with New Directions clients who have gone on the nonprofit's trips to places such as Disneyland. Seated in front are Sylvia and Thomas, and standing behind them are Ellen and Robert.

“The equivalent for us might be if we got to go on the space shuttle.”

“I started it (the trips) after I worked for a large residential institution,” said Ms. Duncan, referring to Devereux, a Goleta home for the developmentally disabled. “Every year at Christmas time, I saw a handful of people who were left behind at the institution. It was devastating. Their families had abandoned them or were not able to care for them. People are with their families all over the country, and here’s a handful of people left behind.”

“I would take them to The Biltmore for lunch, but it did not work to undo the rejection they were feeling,” Ms. Duncan said.

In 1975, she started to arrange holiday tours to Disneyland for those residents. In 1985, she took her efforts one leap further by starting New Directions -- and clients who take the tours have become the envy of others spending the holidays with their families, according to Ms. Duncan.

Tour fees vary from \$975 for the Disneyland holiday trip to \$3,150 for the Christmas trip to Waikiki. Half of the clients pay for the tours, while

the other half receive scholarships, Ms. Duncan said. She explained she wanted to help both those who can and can’t afford to travel.

Ms. Duncan said the four-day Disneyland vacation is an exciting experience for the clients and tour guides alike. “It’s like being shot out of a cannon, and you land four days later. It’s wonderful for everyone. They’re so happy.”

The clients went to Anaheim on a ride donated by Santa Barbara Airbus. They enjoyed a formal dinner and dance with a disc jockey at the Anaheim Marriott, where the staff donates its time. The next day, the clients, who stayed at the Marriott as part of their tour package, got up early and went to Disneyland.

And as usual, the Marriott donated the use of its presidential suite, where Santa Claus passed out gifts before the clients headed to Disney’s California Adventure.

“The bellman has been our Santa every year since 1989,” Ms. Duncan said.

Marriott hotels in San Francisco and San Diego also have provided Santas and rooms for the gift-giving. The San Francisco hotel has a dinner and

dance, and the vacation there also includes a ride on a cable car and visits to Chinatown, Pier 39 and other tourist destinations.

The group in San Diego was scheduled to visit Sea World and Coronado Island, where the 1959 comedy “Some Like It Hot” was filmed.

Photos of the clients on their trips cover the walls at the New Directions offices. One client, Ellen, a 50-year-old Santa Barbara resident, stood right next to a photo of her riding a camel in Jericho, Israel.

“You get to experience

a new culture,” she said. “I learned to ride a camel. It’s a lot easier to ride a horse!”

Markley, 48, a Santa Barbara resident and one of four clients who work at the New Directions office, said her favorite trips have included Australia. “I held a three-month koala bear. It was a baby. I saw a newborn baby kangaroo. A kiwi bear with a long nose reminded me of Pinocchio.”

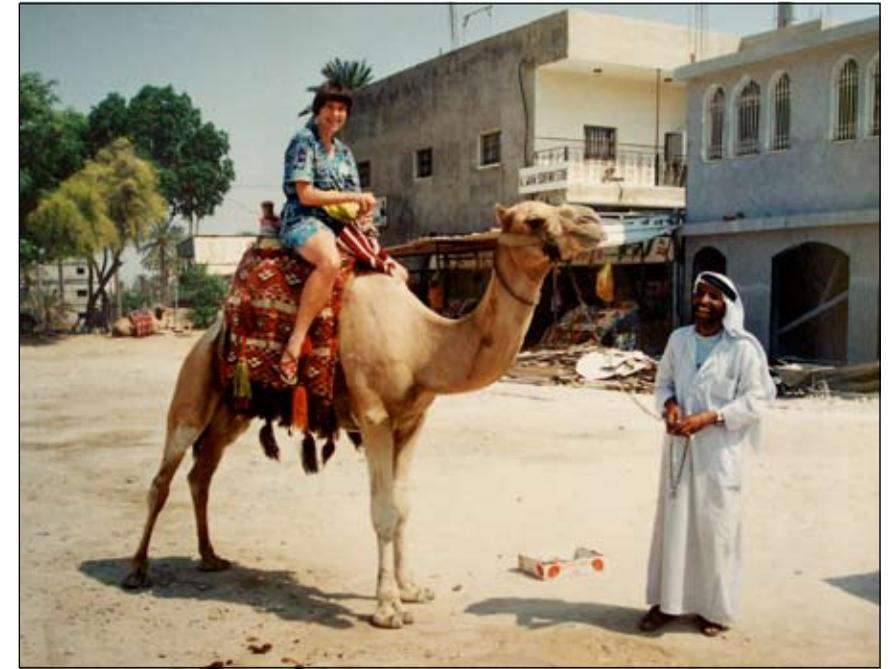
Ms. Duncan laughed when she recalled her clients’ sense of humor during the trips.

“Every tour is outrageously funny. One time we were in London, and we had a really cute tour guide. She asked, ‘Do you have any questions?’ One man said, ‘Do you have any kids?’ Their perspective is very funny.”

And bringing developmentally disabled people on the trips changes how the world sees them, Ms. Duncan said.

“We took a group on the Mississippi Queen down in New Orleans. An older woman told the captain, ‘I paid a lot of money for this trip; someone should have told me there would be handicapped people.’ The captain, to his credit, told her, ‘These people paid the same amount as you, and they’re staying.’ Well, by the end of the tour, Sherri (one of the New Directions clients), who loves older people, helped her to walk around the ship. They became friends.

“We took a group to Fiji. In the Fijian culture, anyone who has a brain impairment is considered cursed. They keep all their handicapped people inside,” Ms. Duncan said. “We had no idea. We had our group horseback riding and having fun. We hadn’t realized the island had noticed our group was



“It’s easier to ride a horse!” says Ellen of Santa Barbara after her New Directions adventure in the 1990s in Jericho, Israel.

there.

“On the last day, all the hotel staff were crying. One of them said, ‘The villagers have been talking, and they’ve said, “We usually keep our people inside. We can see now that’s wrong.”’”

A new direction indeed.

Information on New Directions for people with disabilities, inc., how to volunteer, join a tour, or make donations, can be obtained by calling (888) 967-2841 or by email at hello@newdirectionstravel.org

You can also learn more about this exciting non-profit organization at www.NewDirectionsTravel.org



Robert of Santa Barbara spends time last year with Eeyore at Disneyland. The New Directions client says he appreciates the theme park more now than he did as a kid.