

## New Directions remains on target:

Group that provides travel experiences for people with developmental disabilities celebrates 25 years!



*New Directions Program Manager Kaleena Quarles and Henry celebrated in Mardi Gras fashion by parading with friends at Chase Palm Park during New Directions 25th Anniversary Celebration.*

*by Matt Bloise, News-Press Correspondent*

New Directions, a Santa Barbara non-profit organization that provides travel experiences for people with disabilities, celebrated its 25th Anniversary at Chase Palm Park on Saturday with a Mardi Gras celebration.

The organization has been around the globe to help people with cerebral palsy, autism and other disabilities to experience the world as everyone else does —

by being there.

Nearly 250 people, some with disabilities and some without, gathered near the carousel for the barbecue. They were decked out in feathered masks and dangling beads while jesters pranced around them.

The festivities were completed with face painting, a raffle giveaway and live

music as a celebration and thank-you not only to those who come along on the trips and those who donate to organization, but for the 150 volunteers who make it possible.

New Directions has been in over 50 countries in the last quarter-century, helping about 12,000 travelers with disabilities.

The organization has come a long way from its humble beginning in the studio apartment of Dee Duncan. She was working in 1985 at Devereux, a residential program for the developmentally challenged, and had the opportunity to observe many of the patients having life-altering experiences after traveling. One man, who had anger problems, began to speak again after swimming with dolphins.

“This was the most beneficial program we’ve had. Parents and caretakers report pretty phenomenal changes, their whole world is opened up,” she said. “And I just thought we should do this on a larger scale. Their lives are pretty limited already, and it gives them a whole new understanding of the world.”

She began the organization then and there, and has been doing it full-time ever since.

The group consists of a small collection of paid employees with a much larger group of volunteers, along with highly-trained guides who help navigate the tours.

There is no qualification to attend the tours; anyone throughout the country can join. Scholarships are available,



*Missy starts saving for her Christmas trip with New Directions a year in advance. Once a month she excitedly arrives at the New Directions office in her electric wheelchair to make a payment.*



*New Directions travelers Willie and Kristina happily show off their painted faces. This free event was a great time for old friends to reconnect.*

Traveling can be enough of a headache, but when caring for people with disabilities, the complications can become far more serious. “A tremendous amount of planning goes into these tours because of their needs,” Ms. Duncan explained. “Some people are on oxygen, some people are in wheelchairs. Sometimes

they have seizures. You can’t afford to have a problem, because these folks could literally die. We leave no stone unturned.”

There is usually one guide for every three travelers, allowing that groups are usually 15 persons, and guides must be trained in first aid and involved in special education or a related field. The training program was described as intense. All medical conditions must be planned for.

This kind of thorough care is what led Paula Hess to entrust the group with her son, Tom, for nearly 20 trips.

“I’ve never been quite so impressed,” Ms. Hess said. “The world has opened up for my son, and he’s been all over the place. They do a remarkable job, and the tours are phenomenal. I was in the travel business, and it can be nerve-racking. But I’m not concerned, because it’s so well-run and so well-

managed.”

Nicole Dominguez, a 23-year-old tour guide with New Directions, describes the experience as life-changing for herself as much as it was for the travelers. In addition to being a tour guide for the past year, she works as a unit coordinator at Goleta Valley Cottage Hospital and is set to graduate from Santa Barbara City College. She is going into the nursing program, although if she could do her job with New Directions full-time, she said, she would take it.

“It’s amazing, being able to make them happy during the vacation and have them remember you,” she said. “It’s so self-fulfilling, being able to take them out of their comfort zone and bring them into the community.”

She described her job as “pretty much about having compassion, and loving people with disabilities. This is how we change lives.”

Even after 25 years, the heart of the program is still providing the life-expanding experience of travel for those who can be affected by it as much as anybody else. “Our philosophy is that they

deserve the best that life has to offer,” said Ms. Duncan. “They have full and wonderful lives, and the same desires as anyone else. We’re trying to get the general population to realize they deserve this.”

**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](mailto:hello@newdirectionstravel.org)**

**You can also learn more about this exciting non-profit organization at [www.NewDirectionsTravel.org](http://www.NewDirectionsTravel.org)**



*The day was full of free fun with live Dixieland Jazz, dancing, face painting, juggling jesters, masks, beads, balloons, costumes, prize giveaways, New Orleans style barbecue, a photo booth, carousel rides and exotic birds!*

though limited, so that a traveler might be able to go on a tour once every five years. Those who can pay their own way can go more often. Ms. Duncan said that hardly anyone has been rejected from the program.

Favorite spots for the program tend to be the usual tourist destinations: Las Vegas, Hawaii, Disneyland and Disneyworld, along with cruises and dude ranches in California or Texas.

One of the most popular programs is Holiday Happiness, which creates tours for those who cannot be with family during the holidays.

“I realized there was maybe a handful of people left back at Christmas with nowhere to go,” Ms. Duncan said. “It’s pretty dismal for them, and this gives them an alternative.”

More than 100 people attended these events last year in Anaheim, San Diego, and San Francisco.