

Hope and independence

Businesses help Ramah campers with social skills

BY MARGE BAERENWALD
FEATURE WRITER

Hope and independence are what young adults receive who participate in the Tikvah program sponsored by Camp Ramah in Conover.

Tikvah is the Hebrew word for "hope" — something they are getting while working at six Eagle River businesses.

The eight-week Tikvah program at Camp Ramah is designed for campers with learning problems and social difficulties, including Asperger's syndrome, a form of autism. This unique group integrates campers ages 13 to 18 with peers, while providing the individualized support necessary to help the campers succeed, according to camp director Rabbi David Soloff.

The focus of the program is to promote individual growth through camp activities, social development and Jewish learning. All Ramah campers participate in a full range of social and Judaic activities.

"One of the first things the students learn is how to have friends. Many of the special needs students feel isolated in the general population, then to be Jewish besides, it's very lonely. It's equally or



Yoni Projansky, a participant in the Tikvah program at Camp Ramah, works at Olson Memorial Library in Eagle River.

--Photo By Marge Baerenwald

more important for peer groups to become friends with different people — there's a sense of being inclusive," Soloff said.

For the last four years, the Tikvah program has provided vocational participants, ages 18 to 22, a sense of independence through job training at local businesses by developing their communication

skills. The students in the program are called Atzmayim, the Hebrew word for "independent."

When the program started four years ago, there were three or four students who worked at Chanticleer Inn and Sullivan's Flowerland. This year, there are nine students involved: two at Trig's, two at Eagle River Roasters,

two at Pamida Discount Center, one at the Olson Memorial Library, one at Sullivan's Flowerland and one at Best Western Derby Inn.

Their skills range from the ability to sweep a floor or clean a counter under supervision to working on their own after being given an assignment.

The students' social and learning skills have nothing to do with intelligence, according to co-director Rose Sharon.

"They can be average or above average intelligence, sometimes referred to as high-functioning autism. It causes difficulties in a variety of ways such as socializing and forming relationships, among other things," said Sharon.

For example, Yoni Projansky, who is currently shelving books and videos at the library, may tutor students. He scored very high in standardized national testing.

"He has taken many advanced placement classes in addition to three years of Latin. He is very pleasant, but has some social difficulties," said Sharon.

Sharon spent last winter and spring contacting Eagle

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River business owners to develop a partnership with them.

"All of the businesses have been very gracious," said Sharon. "The goal is for the young people to gain independence, job skills and social skills."

She said the students learn how to conduct themselves during interviews, to arrive at the job on time and to do the job as required.

"It's a learning experience for the counselors as well as the supervisors," Sharon said.

All but two of the group are supervised continually by other young people, called job coaches, from the camp who teach, model and demonstrate how each job is to be done.

Except for Saturdays and Wednesdays, Sharon and her assistant drop off the participants at their various locations along with their job coaches at 9:30 a.m. and pick them up at 1:30 p.m.

"I've become the car-pool mom," said Sharon.

Sharon is a National Board Certified Teacher in Exceptional Needs with a master's degree in public administration and another in neuro-psychology learning disabilities from Brooklyn College in New York City.

Her assistant, Lior Baruch from Beersheva, Israel, holds a bachelor's degree from Ben-Gurion University. He is studying history to become certified in secondary education. He has spent five summers working with Sharon, the first two years as a counselor.

Since the program is completely funded by fees paid by the parents and there is no salary for the participants, some might think the program provides free labor. Sharon explains that, on the contrary, the businesses are providing much needed opportunities for the participants to learn job and social skills as they interact with other participants, their supervisors and the public.

Dan Beihoff of Eagle River Roasters is an enthusiastic supporter of the program. Two young women are presently working at his establishment on West Pine Street.

"It's a wonderful program," Beihoff said. "Camp Ramah representatives explained the program and we agreed to participate. We are delighted with both Maddy and Rebecca and can foresee them becoming more useful to society as they become acquainted with



Gathering at Eagle River Roasters are, from left, Cohn, shop owner Susan Beihoff and student job coach Kashmir Kustanowitz, student Maddy Rebecca Fogel. --Photos By Marge Baerenwald

the equipment and dealing with the public. It's been a very rewarding experience for our family as well.

"Our four kids came to the store and were greeted by the girls and their job coach, Kashmir. The kids were overwhelmed with how open and friendly they all were," said Beihoff.

Terry Tryggeseth of Trig's said the program is excellent.

"It's the first year we've done anything like this, but the potential for interaction between the students and staff is a valuable experience for both," he said. "We're looking forward to doing it year after year."

Mitch Paschen, 19, of Baraboo is a former participant.

He started out as a camper in 2000 and has since participated in several programs at the camp, including the starring role in "The Wiz" and many lunch theaters offered at the camp.

He has completed a pre-vocational course and is now assisting one of the camp computer staff members. He attends UW-Whitewater, where he is studying computer science.

Members of the Atzmayim include Yoni Projansky, 19, of New York, who is working at the library returning books to their shelves. He may do some tutoring later in chemistry and physics. He attends State University at Stony Brook in New York.

Another, Maddy Cohn, 19, of Cleveland, Ohio, is working at Eagle River Roasters and has worked at a hometown bakery where she swept floors, did general cleaning and boxed doughnuts and

pies. She's been at Camp Ramah for seven summers and likes hanging out at the camp.

Camp Ramah was established on Lake Buckatagon west of Conover in 1947, according to Soloff, who has been director since 1975.

"The camp was organized by a Jewish community in Chicago together with the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York to provide a place for children to learn about their heritage, plus have fun outside," said Soloff.

Youths come to the camp

from all over the Midwest. This year, there are more than 400 campers ages 10 to 16, with more than 200 counselors and staff. Activities include the usual outdoor games as well as drama presentations and art displays.

The Tikvah program was started in the early 1970s by a network of Ramah camps all over the United States. The first one was established in the Boston area for special needs students.

For more information about the Tikvah program, call (715) 479-4400.



Tikvah program participant Jenny Balfour is learning job and social skills at Sullivan's Flowerland in Eagle River.