

# The ARC of Sedgwick County program enriches lives of students as well as staff and volunteers

STORY BY AMY HOUSTON

When summer arrives, Eastsiders Scott and Amy Gepner have the same concerns as many other parents.

"You definitely don't want your kids sitting at home doing nothing during the summer," said Amy Gepner.

Like most parents, they also hope their son doesn't lose ground in his education. That's even more of a concern for the Gepners because their son Adam, 16, is a special-needs student.

According to the ARC of Sedgwick County, special-education teachers spend approximately 85 percent of the fall quarter re-teaching what was lost over the summer. The YESS program is designed to help alleviate that problem.

YESS stands for Youth Education & Summer Socialization. It's a partnership of the ARC of Sedgwick County, USD 259, the Wichita Department of Parks and Recreation, Sedgwick County and United Way of the Plains. The nine-week summer program is geared for students age 5 to 21 with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

"It's been an amazing experience for our family," Gepner said.

Her son has participated since he was 5 years old.

"It's something that he very much looks forward to," she said. "He always wants to know what the schedule is."

The YESS program combines education and recreation. Kids are divided by age group and spend time in classrooms for different ability levels. They have library time, and they work on phonics and reading skills through games.

They also have adaptive physical education, field trips, theme weeks and sibling week. One recent theme was reality TV shows, so campers made "Duck Dynasty" artwork and held a lookalike contest.

"Each week is a different theme," Gepner said. "They work hard to do something new every summer."

"I just think it's very important the way they balance their day with education and recreation," she added. "It's invaluable to how they can communicate and the experiences it gives them on a weekly basis. It's a great program."

In addition to maintaining their education, campers work on socialization skills through the program. Each



Adam Gepner, right, is one of the students served by the YESS program, which is operated by the ARC of Sedgwick County. He is pictured in an antique car with YESS staff member Anna Olsen. *Contributed photo*

classroom includes multiple teachers and volunteers. Helpers range from special-education teachers to teenagers who are typical, or do not have special needs.

"It is an interesting mix," Gepner said. "I think that's what makes it so successful. They have quite a bit of not only experience but they are very patient with them. They know how to work with them, which is important to me as a parent."

The diversity of the camp and the positive experiences contribute to Adam's self-esteem.

"It gives him a lot of self-confidence," Gepner said. "He likes the variety of activities that he gets to experience. And he's with peers and young adults like him and some that are typical. He gets a lot of out of it."

YESS StuCo president Charles Christianbury, a 12th-grader, has attended the camp since he was 5. He is active at the camp, which even includes overnight activities so parents may enjoy a date night or spend time with other children who don't have special needs.

A recent trip to Kansas City featured time at a water

park, a visit at Worlds of Fun and "dining out, which not all kids get to do a lot of," Gepner said. "Plus they're responsible for taking care of their things, which sounds very simple."

She explained that it's important for Adam to take on responsibilities like finding his hotel room and knowing where his suitcases are. He carries the YESS program schedule on his iPhone so he knows which days to wear his YESS T-shirt and when to bring a swimsuit and beach towel if he'll be swimming.

"It's just a great program for a lot of different reasons," Gepner remarked. "I couldn't ask for more. The people are phenomenal."

"It's a big undertaking," she continued, "and to have the patience and the calm to do what they do, five days a week, nine weeks straight during the summer, they're all very gifted, very talented individuals that care about kids and young adults that are special-needs kids. Not everyone has that kind of patience and the caring, too. It's all a nice little package tied up with a bow."

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