

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

STORY BY AMY HOUSTON

When summer arrives, WestSiders Sean and Gretchen DiGiovanni have the same concerns as many other parents.

They don't want their children to spend all their time on electronics instead of remaining active. And, like most parents, they also hope their son doesn't lose ground in his education. That's even more of a concern for the DiGiovannis because their son Sam, 12, 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.

"Doing the YESS program every year integrated him into a typical lifestyle for the summertime," Sean DiGiovanni said of his son. "And their education piece continued the work that we do through IEPs during the school year. It keeps going on, so he doesn't lose ground when school starts back up."

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.

"Every week is themes and every day there's a plan," DiGiovanni said. "For my son Sam, with autism, it's structure but it integrates him into the typical world."

In addition to maintaining their education, campers work on socialization skills through the program. Each classroom includes multiple teachers and volunteers. Help-



ABOVE: YESS participant Rebecca Oare, left, poses for a photo with volunteer Paul DiGiovanni.

LEFT: The DiGiovanni triplets – Jack, top, Paul and Sam – are pictured during an activity at this summer's YESS program. Sam is one of the students who attends YESS. Jack and Paul served as volunteers for the first time this summer.

Contributed photos

ers range from special-education teachers to teenagers who are typical, or do not have special needs.

This year, for the first time, Sam's brothers – Jack and Paul – served as volunteers. The boys are triplets. Their father said that although Jack and Paul were used to living with an autistic sibling, it was good for them to work with kids who have various special needs.

The program allows the triplets' parents to continue working full time, and it 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.

"The socialization aspect is the priority," DiGiovanni said. "When Sam was 6, before YESS camp, going out to dinner was a frightening experience."

The camp also led to Sam spending the night away from home in Kansas City, and this summer he learned to text message with staff members and his parents.

"Really our life is based on routine. Sam's life is based on routine. We facilitate that," DiGiovanni said. "Then when summer comes, I can't imagine a child that's not in YESS camp because things would fall off, and for us that doesn't happen."

Westside Story