

# Special camps address needs of special campers

While Maryland's school systems have a variety of educational programs for students with special needs throughout the school year, many parents struggle to find something enriching come summer.

To complement the part-time extended school year services, area families turn to summer camps that offer unique learning experiences.

Camp PALS is a one-week sleepover camp for those ages 14-21 with Down syndrome. Located 85 miles north of Baltimore at Cabrini College in Radnor, Pa., the camp strives to offer new opportunities and the chance for campers to become more independent.

"What excited us about it most is that you have that one-to-one camper to counselor ratio," said Nicol Hudson, whose son, Alex, 18, attended Camp PALS the last two years. Volunteer counselors are young adults who live and travel with their campers throughout the week. They are paired up a month before camp starts to get to know each other better.

Each day at Camp PALS involves new activities, such as bowling, movies, swimming, bike riding and day trips. Alex, a junior at Kenwood High School in Baltimore County, enjoys traveling to Ocean City, N.J., and Dorney Park in Allentown, Pa. But his favorite part about camp, he said, is the food - especially cheese pizza.

"Even though all the kids have Down syndrome, they are all different," said Hudson. "They send you a list of activities and you get to pick what you want to do. At 18, he (Alex) has aged out of most camps. This camp is a salvation for us - at least a week for him to go somewhere."

For parents who are nervous about their children being away from home, Camp PALS makes every effort to put them at ease.

"They call you during the week to let you know how he's doing," Hudson said. "They

have a blog, and every day they post pictures and videos.”

At the end of the week, campers look forward to camp Olympics and a graduation ceremony. Camp PALS holds reunions throughout the year to keep campers and their families in touch with each other.

For campers who like to stay local, the Arc of Baltimore offers Bay Buddies, a one-week day program at the Living Classrooms Foundation in Harbor East. Activities include sailing, a trip to the Science Center, a planting project and therapeutic horseback riding.

Darla Kinch’s daughter, Rachel, 11, has attended Bay Buddies for five summers. Rachel, who goes to Ridge Ruxton School, is profoundly autistic and has a seizure disorder.

“I like that they do a lot of different activities,” said Kinch. “Most of the kids, if they didn’t have this opportunity, wouldn’t be able to do them.”

Take horseback riding, which many families can’t afford or might find impossible with a child who has physical disabilities. Four staff members must surround the horse at all times when Rachel is riding, ensuring her safety if she were to have a seizure.

Bay Buddies is available to students from five Baltimore City and Baltimore County public schools. Teachers work with staff from the Arc and Living Classrooms to develop a program for each child based on his or her individual education plan. They also work with the students during the school’s week of camp.

“It’s a wonderful program,” said Kinch. “The people who run it absolutely are genuine, special people. You can see it in how they handle the kids.”

### **Camp PALS**

Camp PALS will be held June 20-26. For more information, visit [www.camppals.org](http://www.camppals.org) or e-mail [info@camppals.org](mailto:info@camppals.org). The cost per camper is \$850; scholarships are available.

### **Bay Buddies**

Bay Buddies is held for several weeks in August at the Living Classrooms Foundation. Registration is available for students at the following participating schools: William W. F. McMechen Middle/High School and William S. Baer School in Baltimore City and Battle Monument, Maiden Choice and Ridge Ruxton Schools in Baltimore County. Funding is available. For more information, call 410-296-2272.