



Campers Nathan and Erika dip into their freshly made ice cream.

Greetings from Camp Esperanza

Written by Margaret Morris

Summer camp: it's a traditional American experience for lots of kids. For most kids with intellectual/developmental disabilities, it's not an opportunity that is readily available to them. Enter our heroine, Girl Scout Gold Award candidate Julia Nail in her role as Head Camp Counselor and creator of "Camp Esperanza." With support from the staff at Villa's Speech and Language Center, volunteer Julia spent



Villa Volunteer and Camp Esperanza Creator Julia Nail.

a year planning and putting together all of the elements to create a fun and educational summer camp experience for students at the Villa Esperanza School, most of whom have moderate to severe autism.

For four hours a week during summer session, students left their classrooms and gathered around an outdoor picnic table on the school campus that served as camp headquarters. Each camper decorated their

own "Camp Esperanza" T-shirt which would be their camp uniform. Daily camp rituals included putting on their tees and camper badges and doing the C-A-M-P cheer. Every student took part. With Julia leading the group, "Give me a C" was acted out with body spelling, shouted out, spoken softly or, in the case of our non-verbal students, typed out on an iPad. However they cheered, the campers achieved that "all-for-one and one-for-all" moment of camaraderie that is a hallmark of the summer camp experience.



Jamaire displays his "fish cracker" creation.

Social skills are often a challenge for individuals with autism, so Julia chose activities that encouraged the campers to interact with each other. Students took turns helping to pass out tools and materials to their fellow campers. Fun projects like making ice cream required asking each other for ingredients and sharing supplies. Food related projects were a favorite since they always ended with campers consuming their creations. The camp atmosphere created a place where the students could just have fun with each other while participating in the daily activities. The relaxed, casual environment made it easier for them to gain confidence in their social skills. Since the students came from various classrooms, they had the opportunity to meet different students and the possibility of making new friends, just like they would at any summer camp.



Camp Leader Julia guides the group activity.

Julia's commitment to the Camp Esperanza project grew out of her own enjoyment of going to summer camp. She believes, as does Villa, that children with disabilities should have the chance to do the same things as other kids. In addition to all of her organizational, planning, and creative skills, she exhibited a genuine affinity for the students who benefitted from her project. Speech Center Director Gwendolyn Eberhard and her staff were very impressed with Julia's maturity and her natural leadership skills. Her calm,

reassuring demeanor helped her to connect with the students. While she didn't consider herself to be a particularly patient person at the start, she realized very quickly that if the kids were going to participate fully, the activities were just going to take a little longer, but it would be worth it.

The criteria for the Girl Scout Gold Award are extensive and specific. Among other requirements, Julia had to complete 80 hours on her project and raise all of the money to cover expenses herself. Beyond the detailed requisites, the overriding purpose of every project is to change people's lives for the better. For Julia, the measurement of this accomplishment was a simple one. On the last day of camp, students completed a simple questionnaire. They could say if they liked camp or not. Camp Esperanza got the thumbs-up from all of them.

Program Spotlight

The **Hjelte-Phillips Speech & Language Center at Villa Esperanza** is a community clinic providing a warm and compassionate environment where parents, teachers and caregivers are included in the therapy process. Our clinicians have a wealth of experience treating speech and language needs resulting from phonological and articulation disorders, learning differences, neurodevelopmental and intellectual disabilities, and acquired brain injuries. We have specialized expertise in treating children, including infants and toddlers; individuals with autism spectrum disorder; and nonverbal or minimally verbal clients who need assistive technology including augmentative and alternative communication (AAC). In addition, we provide training and support to educators and related professionals across the Los Angeles County region.

Funding for speech assessment and therapy is available from school districts, regional centers, Kaiser Permanente insurance and private pay. If you are interested in enrolling, touring or receiving more information, please contact **Gwendolyn Meier Eberhard**, SLP, Center Director, GEberhard@VillaEsperanzaServices.org.

Hjelte-Phillips Speech & Language Center
Phone (626) 795-8355
www.VillaEsperanzaServices.org

Community Service Stars

Villa Adults Honored by Los Angeles County

Each year, the **Los Angeles County Commission for Older Adults** observes Older Americans Recognition Day. Part of the celebration includes a ceremony to present their **Outstanding Community Service Awards**. Villa's Adult Day Program (ADP) has been proud to have four of their clients receive this award. It is an honor for each of the recipients as well as a tribute to all individuals with intellectual/developmental disabilities. When Villa Esperanza was founded 55 years ago, the prevalent belief was that people born with a developmental disability would have very little chance to live a meaningful life, let alone make a contribution to their community. Thanks to the courage and perseverance of individuals who believed otherwise, attitudes changed, support and services were developed and opportunities were created to give each individual a chance to reach their full potential.

The clients from ADP who have received this award exemplify individuals who, with support and encouragement, have taken advantage of the opportunity to volunteer at local non-profit organizations. They represent over 100 adults and seniors from Villa Esperanza Services who donate their time in service to others. Each of these individuals has made Villa proud. Their achievements are proof that people with disabilities can live fulfilling lives and contribute to their communities.



Glen White earned recognition for helping at the Foothill Unity Food Bank in Monrovia. His duties there involved helping to ready food items for distribution to people in need.

When asked about his favorite part of volunteering there, the usually shy Glen did not hesitate to reply "Cookies." When he's not volunteering, Glen likes doing arts & crafts projects at ADP.



Sandy Marasco was honored for her help in delivering "Meals on Wheels" to homebound seniors in Glendale. She likes making other people happy, so this volunteer position was a perfect fit for her. Sandy

has fun doing things with all her friends at ADP and her housemates at the Villa residential home where she lives. Her favorite creative activities are drawing and painting.



Jack Shon has helped out at several non-profits including Union Station Homeless Services in Pasadena. He's made a lot of friends there while assisting the staff in getting the tables set for lunches that

are served each day to homeless individuals. He takes pride in knowing that the staff trust him to get the job done. At ADP, he has established himself as the resident "ladies' man," although his friendliness and outgoing nature make him popular with everyone.



Melinda Thomas has participated in several volunteer opportunities and has also represented the intellectually/developmentally disabled population as an advocate for increased

funding for services. In her role as President of the Participant Advocacy Board at ADP, she has attended rallies, written letters, and made phone calls and personal visits to legislators and other community leaders. She takes pride in being a voice for her fellow clients who are unable to speak for themselves.

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Hjelte-Phillips

Speech & Language Center

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Community Integration Program (CIP)

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Employment Services

626-449-2919, ext. 191

Adult Residential Program

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Independent Living Skills (ILS)

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Human Services Center
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Thousand Oaks, CA 91360

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VILLA ESPERANZA SERVICES

*Where Hope is Hard at Work for Individuals
with Intellectual/Developmental Disabilities*

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Villa Celebrates 55th Anniversary!

Longtime Villa client Mike Hale rocking a party hat during the SAS (Service and Social) Club festivities honoring Villa's 55 years of Providing Love, Care and Hope for Individuals with Intellectual/Developmental Disabilities.