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Surfs up for special needs kids, Coast Guard members *(Story and photos by Petty Officer 2nd Class Christopher D. McLaughlin)*



Petty Officer 3rd Class Robert Simpson (left), Petty Officer 3rd Class Tim Navarro (middle) and Petty Officer 3rd Class John Knight, rescue swimmers from Coast Guard Air Station Atlantic City, N.J., carry a Best Day New Jersey participant on a surf board to the water Saturday, July 19, 2008, at Seven Presidents Oceanfront Park in Monmouth, N.J.

For most people it was just a day at the beach on the New Jersey shore. The air was growing thick and heavy with the heat. Temperatures were quickly leaving the 90s and moving well over 100 degrees as late morning approached. The beach was packed with chairs and umbrellas. Everyone had staked their claim among the infinite expanse of sand, but for a group of 16 kids a special day was about to happen at a roped off area of the beach, where a tent stood tall among the sea of beach goers. Among the roped off section preparations had been made for their arrival. Surf boards, boogie boards, helmets, wetsuits, life jackets and kayaks awaited them.

A newly established non-profit organization called Best Day New Jersey in Sea Bright, started by Petty Officer 3rd Class Lake Downham, a rescue swimmer at Coast Guard Air Station Atlantic City, N.J., and his fiancé Alexis Leaman were kicking off the first day of a free two-day beach camp for kids with special needs at Seven Presidents Oceanfront Park in Monmouth, N.J., Saturday July 19.

"It's going to be great. The kids are going to get to go into the water and do some surfing," said Downham.

Kids and their parents arrived at the beach greeted by a host of volunteers. Many were members of Coast Guard Air Station Atlantic City.

"I wouldn't plan to spend my weekend another way. I'm having a real good time," said Petty Officer 3rd Class Brian Tricarico, a member of Air Station Atlantic City.

After the kids did some stretching to prepare for the water sports, they ran through a beach obstacle course to get warmed up. After the course, they got dressed in wet suits, life jackets and helmets and headed for the water. For most of them this was going to be their first experience on a surf board.

"It's pretty emotional. The rescues I've had were pretty cool but these kids, I don't know, I like it lot. I like this more than anything," said Downham. The water is such a big part of my life. These kids love it. They have a great time. That's what it's all about."

Best Day is a spin off from the Ride a Wave Foundation based in Santa Cruz, Calif., founded in 1998 by former tandem surfing champion and lifeguard, Danny Cortazzo. Best Day co-founder and co-executive director Max Montgomery, former Ride a Wave volunteer, flew from California with other volunteers to assist Downham in the opening weekend of Best Day New Jersey.

"Communities rally around a wonderful cause, and here's a great thing to involve the Coast Guard with, a community of kids with disabilities," said Montgomery. "It gives parents a chance to relax and know their kids are safe and are able to watch them and see the joy in their faces."

Downham says their goal is to get the New Jersey community involved. Since he's an active duty military member he eventually will have to transfer. He hopes the program will eventually run its self.



Petty Officer 1st Class Karen Voorhees, a rescue swimmer with Coast Guard Air Station Atlantic City, N.J., plays in the surf Saturday, July 19, 2008, with a Best Day New Jersey participant at Seven Presidents Oceanfront Park in Monmouth, N.J.

"It's blowing up. Everyone wants one of these camps," said Downham.

With the approach of the afternoon the volunteers get the kids off the surf and boogie boards and walk them down the beach to meet some very special guests a few hundred yards away. On lookers unaware of what is about to happen stare at the Best Day group, wondering what is the purpose of the sudden invasion. Then from the south, the sounds of helicopter blades cut through the thick afternoon air. A helicopter crew from Coast Guard Air Station Atlantic City appears just off shore. A roar of excitement is heard from all the beach goers as a rescue swimmer is lowered from the helicopter into the surf. The aircrew gives the Best Day kids and everyone a glimpse into how the Coast Guard rescues people at sea.

The helicopter crew concludes the search and rescue demonstration and flies out to sea toward the horizon. Everyone thinks the show is over, but the helicopter traveling full speed flies back toward the beach and zooms overhead and breaks into a turn. Everyone goes wild.

"He loves the water and loves the helicopter. We're going to have a hard time getting him out of here," said Frank Taliertio, the father of 16-year-old Nick Taliertio.



"I like surfing. I like helicopter," said Nick.

After the search and rescue demonstration, the group heads back to their area on the beach to continue surfing and body boarding. The expression on the faces of kids, parents and volunteers are all someone needs to see to know how fun the day has been.

"This is just wonderful. So many people giving their time and to a parent it's really heart warming," said Nora Plummer, a parent at Best Day. "This is our first time coming here and this is great. He doesn't want to get out of the water. Although, I heard they are serving pizza, which will get him out."

Best Day New Jersey volunteers steady a surf board with a special needs child aboard to catch an oncoming wave Saturday, July 19, 2008, at Seven Presidents Oceanfront Park in Monmouth, N.J.

Best Day Foundation is a non-profit organization that empowers communities to create safe, fun-filled beach days for kids with special needs - enabling them to experience the thrill of riding a wave, regardless of their challenges. If you would like to learn more about Best Day New Jersey you can visit their website at <http://www.bestdayfoundation.org/>.

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