

Summer camp caters to autistic children

BY LORI ROETS

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"Schools out for summer!"

These are words many kids daydream of hearing all school year long. Yet summertime has long been a challenge for working parents who must struggle to find a suitable place for their kids to go over the nearly three-month school break.

Start planning too late and the choices become very limited.

Now, add a child with special needs into this picture and the whole problem just became 100 times more difficult. For parents of children with an autism spectrum disorder, summers can become a real nightmare.

For these children, routine, consistency and predictability are essential and, unfortunately, something not necessarily available through the average child-care provider.

Autism spectrum disorder, or ASD, refers to a group of developmental disabilities — including classic autism, pervasive developmental disorder-not otherwise specified (PPD-NOS), and Asperger's syndrome — that affect a person's ability to understand what they see, hear, and otherwise sense. It is a brain disorder that

See **AUTISM** / Page 10A

Autism

Continued from Page 1A

impacts communication, social interaction, and behavior.

Individuals with ASD typically have difficulty understanding verbal and nonverbal communication and learning appropriate ways of relating to other people, objects and events.

Union County is home to a sizable population of children and adult on the autism spectrum — not surprising given the fact that ASD now affects one in 166 children.

There are, however, programs in North Carolina and the greater Charlotte area geared to autistic children and young adults that can give parents and other caregivers a much-needed break. One such program is the Autism Society of North Carolina's annual summer camp, staged in two locations — Camp Royall in Pittsboro and Mountain Adventure at Black Mountain.

Campers are grouped by age and accepted using a lot-

tery system which allows kids who have not attended camp before or not attended recently get the first opportunity to enjoy a camping experience.

Two Union County teenagers were selected to attend Camp Mountain Adventure last summer. And as luck would have it, both are featured on the cover of this year's 2006 Camp Chronicle, the Autism Society of North Carolina's statewide magazine highlighting the benefits of the camp experience for autistic youths.

Joshua Roets, a freshman at Parkwood High, and Timothy DeRuiter, an eighth-grader at Parkwood Middle, both enjoyed their camping experience. Swimming was one of both boys' favorite camp activities. Neither knew the other would be attending camp that week, although the boys knew each other from classes they shared at Parkwood Middle last year. "I hope I can go to Mountain Adventure this summer," Roets said.

There are other camps catering to autistic youth

as well as day programs accepting children with many types of special needs. The January meeting of The Autism Society of North Carolina's Union County chapter on Jan. 18 will highlight many of these types of programs. Representatives of a number of area summer programs will be on hand to share information about their services.

ASNC-UC is a nonprofit group, bringing together Union County families dealing with ASD to offer knowledge, networking and support. The chapter meets at 7 p.m. on the third Thursday of each month during the school year at Walter Bickett Education Center at 501 Lancaster Ave. Child care for attendees is available by advance reservation.

For more information, contact either of the chapter's co-leaders: Kim Belk (704/753-1174) or Cheryl Verrico (704/845-5358).

• *Lori Roets is a freelance writer and photographer residing in Monroe. She can be reached at lroets@hughes.net or (704) 764-7686.*



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