

Newport Aquatic Center Welcomes Beyond Blindness for an Inclusive Summer Camp Outrigger Outing



By Jasmine Jenkins | Special to the NB Indy

On August 1, the Newport Aquatic Center welcomed Beyond Blindness, a nonprofit in Santa Ana providing support for visually impaired children and their families, to their facility as part of Beyond Blindness' inclusive summer camp, taking the campers on outriggers in the Back Bay.

This six-year partnership through the NAC's Makapo program provides the opportunity for the children to play in the water with the proper accommodation.

Makapo is the name of the NAC's outrigger paddling program for those with disabilities, named for the Hawaiian words maka (eye) and po (night).

The project began in 2006 when a group of five blind men, under coach Billy Whitford, became the first all-blind team to complete the Queen Liliu'okalani Outrigger Canoe race in Hawaii. Whitford, now the executive director of the NAC, continues to support disabled athletes and community members through his work.

He asserted that Makapo is “absolutely one of our top programs because of what the place was built for: to give back to the community.”

“It’s unbelievably humbling,” said Whitford about the Beyond Blindness partnership. “It’s rewarding, yes, but it’s just so humbling to be able to help the kids and to show them that there’s so many opportunities out there for special needs kids. All you gotta do is look at their faces, look at the parents. Everybody is so happy. The vibe is so cool when these programs are down here.”



Kristin McKay helping her son, Charlie, get ready for his outrigger experience. Photo by Chris Trela

The inclusive summer camp is only one of many services Beyond Blindness offers for visually impaired children. Between infant/toddler classrooms, a preschool program, various therapies, and even a teen social group, Beyond Blindness offers comprehensive care for people with a wide range of disabilities.

According to Jacob Garcia, family support associate and teacher of the visually impaired at Beyond blindness, “The Beyond Blindness inclusive summer camp provides children with a unique opportunity to participate in activities they might not typically engage in. They are also able to participate in a safe and inclusive environment that promotes their confidence and independence.”

Ashley Yee, MSW, director of family support at Beyond Blindness, said the inclusive Summer Camp has a positive impact on children with visual impairments and their families.

“The camp provides a space for families to send their kids to enjoy a typical camp experience with inclusive and accessible activities,” said Yee. “The kids can also interact with other peers who share similar challenges and opportunities. The camp helps them develop confidence and social skills in a fun and supportive environment. We design our activities with tactile and sensory elements that enable the participation of campers with different degrees of visual impairment and blindness.”

Kristin McKay, a Beyond Blindness board member and parent, spoke on her family’s experiences and how Beyond Blindness changed her son Charlie’s life. Charlie has a genetic disorder called Hunter syndrome along with cerebral palsy and cortical vision impairment, which is blindness caused by damage to the parts of the brain that process vision.

When the McKays lived in Orange County, Charlie attended the Beyond Blindness daycare program. However, at that time, the preschool program was shut down due to COVID. The McKays moved to Los Angeles County, and just a month later, the preschool reopened.

“I was trying to go back to work, finally, and I had called around to all these places, all these daycares, preschools, everywhere, no one could take him,” explained Kristin. “Beyond Blindness was the only place that not only could take him but took care of him well and loved him.”



"A lot of—well really, all—preschools or daycares...they don't have the staffing, they don't have the knowledge, they don't have the equipment, so they just say no" to children with more complex disabilities such as Charlie.

Left with nearly no other childcare options, Kristin drove 40 miles each way four times every day so that Charlie could attend the preschool in Santa Ana and receive the support he needed to thrive.

McKay shared how Charlie grew leaps and bounds from before they found Beyond Blindness to now. In the past, Charlie's conditions prevented him from interacting with other people, but now "he loves being around other kids. He can interact with people in a different way than he used to be able to."



She acknowledged that the Beyond Blindness staff also taught her to “challenge him and let him explore new things,” particularly in the way that they adapt activities to include all abilities.

She continued, “the world can accommodate my son, and he shouldn’t ever have to hear the word ‘no’ just because he has disabilities.”

About the Newport Aquatic Center, she was relieved that “they’ve done this before, they love making those accommodations, and they’re ready to go. They’re all set for all the kids because they’ve seen them before.”