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A best day

Those with special needs get an outing at Leadbetter Beach

By PAUL GONZALEZ, NEWS-PRESS STAFF WRITER

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A little May gray couldn't stop more than 30 special needs children and young adults from eagerly splashing into the water at Leadbetter Beach on Sunday morning.

The outing was sponsored by the Best Day Foundation, a nonprofit organization that hosts adventure activities for special-needs people across the country, but primarily in Southern California. Sunday marked the organization's sixth annual beach day in Santa Barbara.

After donning wet suits and pairing up with a volunteer "buddy," the participants marched from the picnic area down to the water where a fleet of kayaks were waiting to take them into the ocean. Surfboards, bodyboards and handicap accessible beach chairs also were available for participants to use.

"This event has completely changed my son," said Yanualia Anguiano of her 11-year-old boy, Alan.

Ms. Anguiano learned about the Best Day Foundation through the Tri-Counties Regional Center five years ago. She has taken her son to the Santa Barbara beach day event from Ventura ever since.

"I remember the first time he (Alan) came he would scream and cry," said Ms. Anguiano, who explained her son suffers from a nonverbal form of autism.

"This experience completely changed him. He loves to come now," she laughed as Alan greeted her with a hug after disembarking from one of the kayaks. He was escorted to his mother by a pair of volunteers who said surfing was next on the itinerary.

"One of the big things is that he's nonverbal and when he would write he would just scribble things like a 2-year-old. Now he can write," she said excitedly as she

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Volunteer Adam Garber, of Goleta, helps Jacob Torres 9, of Ventura, surf during the Best Day Foundation's fun day at Leadbetter Beach on Sunday.
ROB VARELA/NEWS-PRESS PHOTOS



James Gin, 5, of Santa Barbara, gets some help with riding the waves from volunteer Erik Flores of Ventura.

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grabbed a shell from the beach to demonstrate.

Alan took the shell and wrote his first and last name in the sand.

"That's something I never thought he would be able to do," his mother said.

Kelli McLaughlin of Ventura said she wasn't sure her 17-year-old son, Zane, would be able to get into the water due to his Emanuel syndrome.

"I really didn't think this was going to happen. But they've got volunteers and a chair and everyone's been so great."

A trio of volunteers helped fasten Zane into the chair and leashed his service dog, a black lab named Phillipa, at his side.

"This isn't something I could do on my own. They provide these chairs in Ventura but for one person to pick it up and help him into it is too much. And I'd have to leave him alone when I pick it up, which I just can't do."

Jen Gamez-Sparrow, co-chair of the Best Day Foundation Santa Barbara chapter, said logistical support provided by more than 100 volunteers gives families the opportunity to see their loved ones push their boundaries.

"For families it's a hassle to get them to be able to come to the beach because of their needs, and they may not have things like wet suits, life jackets, helmets," Ms. Gamez-Sparrow said.

"Most of all it's just a way to introduce them to something. Instead of always having the label of disability I feel like this allows them to feel like they're people, they're kids first, they are able."

Best Day Foundation founder Brooks Lambert added that the event gives the special-needs community an opportunity to interact with the community at large.

"A lot of people ask themselves 'How do I talk to that person?' Maybe a person with autism doesn't have the same facial expressions, or, 'What do I say to someone in a wheelchair?' This breaks all those boundaries and helps people understand we're all people first."

The next Best Day Foundation beach day in Santa Barbara will be on Sept. 22 at Leadbetter Beach. To register as a participant or volunteer, visit <https://bestdayfoundation.org>.

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