

MOUNTAIN SUNRISE ROTARY CLUB

Keeping camp going - virtually

By **MARY-JUSTINE LANYON**
Editor

In 2020, Kelly Kunsek, director of Camp Paivika in Crestline, told members of the Mountain Sunrise Rotary Club, the camp was set to have its biggest program to date.

“We were going to operate nine sessions,” Kunsek said, with 60 campers in each session. “We were sold out.”

And then COVID-19 hit and Camp Paivika – which serves people with disabilities – had to shut its doors.

“Our population is among the most vulnerable. A lot of our campers have a higher incidence of respiratory and heart issues,” Kunsek told the Rotarians last June.

Kunsek added that they came to realize that the level of care required by their campers would make social distancing all but impossible. In addition to many needing a great deal of personal care – lifting, bathing, dressing, feeding – some do not have the capability to understand why social distancing is necessary.

The camp, which was started in 1947, usually serves children from the age of 9 through adults with a range of disabilities. Their mission, Kunsek said, “is to help individuals with disabilities live their best

lives and provide support to them and their families to do that.”

When the camp is in session, campers enjoy stays of five to nine nights. During their stays they can swim, go horseback riding, do arts and crafts and even camp out at night.

Rather than leave all those campers disappointed, Kunsek got to work on a new program – Camp Paivika at Home.

This virtual camp was a great success, Kunsek reported a year later. “I hadn’t even heard of Zoom. But we couldn’t just tell the campers, ‘Sorry, see you next year.’ We had to meet their need for socialization.”

While transitioning to a virtual program was challenging for everyone, Kunsek said she was “blown away by how successful it was.”

They offered the virtual program free of charge to all the campers who had registered last year and offered programming all week. One thing they learned is that smaller groups work better. Managing 100 campers online at the same time proved to be quite a challenge.

Kunsek had hoped to be able to open the doors of Camp Paivika this summer but that is not to be. The guidelines for overnight camps were only just released by



Kelly Kunsek, director of Camp Paivika (Photo by Mary-Justine Lanyon)

the CDC, not giving Kunsek enough time to prepare and register her guests. In addition, she said, the staff has to get too close to the campers to meet the guidelines.

And so, with a virtual program already under their belts, Camp Paivika is virtual again this summer. Kunsek said they will group the campers into tracks and offer the same program three times a day. Having 20 to 30 in a group is easier to manage, she noted.

When she spoke with the Mountain Sunrise Rotary on June 16, the virtual camp was already in session. “Our staff is in Big Bear today,” she said, “taking the campers virtually to the zoo. It’s nature week so they took a nature walk the other day.”

The campers watch a movie together online on Monday nights and on Fridays they have an open chat. “We bring everyone in to discuss a topic and then split them up into breakout rooms. Everyone gets time for socialization,” Kunsek said.

“So many of the campers have adapted to technology,” she added. “They have learned a lot of new skills.”

Some parents have told Kunsek they are “blown away” by their sons and daughters going online, finding the schedule and clicking on the link to join a camp session.

“When it came to the end of the summer last year,” she noted, “the parents pleaded with us to continue doing something. The campers were at home, not at school or at their day programs. We decided to try it for a month and charged a small

fee to cover staffing.” They created clubs – fitness, cooking, books – and consistently had 70 people registered year-round.

“We found there’s a real need for this,” Kunsek said. “Adult campers don’t have a lot going on in their lives.”

The silver lining to come out of the pandemic is now Camp Paivika hopes to have virtual programming year-round for campers who need that engagement.

“We’ve been trying for years to figure out how we can engage campers the rest of the year,” Kunsek said.

When asked about the camp’s funding, Kunsek said she was pleased with how many people still supported them last year. “I think a lot of people were worried about what would happen to the camp.”

She had offered campers who had registered for the 2020 season a refund but also suggested the family could donate the money to Camp Paivika.

“We had \$20,000 donated back from families who had registered but couldn’t attend. That is a testimony to how much camp means to them,” Kunsek said.

Camp Paivika – which was one of the first camps in the U.S. built and designed for people with disabilities – will celebrate its 75th anniversary next year. “I keep telling the campers it will be a three-month-long party,” Kunsek said.

For more information on Camp Paivika, visit their website, www.abilityfirst.org/camp-paivika.