

A new dining area for disabled kids

Camp Pa-Qua-Tuck breaks ground on dining expansion

By JENNETT MERIDEN RUSSELL

Since its inception in 1948, Camp Pa-Qua-Tuck has become a popular summer destination for many disabled children – perhaps too popular.

For years, kids attending camp had to eat in shifts, because the Center Moriches facility's tiny dining area was too small for the number of kids at the camp, let alone their wheelchairs and human attendants.

However, that's about to change this spring, thanks to a roughly \$400,000 project to expand the dining area, which is being funded by the camp's steward, the Rotary Club of the Moriches.

Local elected officials joined with Rotary Club members last Friday at the camp for an official groundbreaking ceremony.

Pa-Qua-Tuck's Executive Director Bridget Costello noted that the expansion has been a long time coming.

"It's finally happening," Costello chimed. "Long before me, this was a dream of both my predecessors and we're hoping it comes off without too many hitches. Construction usually has things that stumble and bumble in, but if we stay on schedule and really crank it out we can open with our normal schedule and it won't be a hindrance at all."

Westhampton Beach architect Nick Vero designed the new space. Gentry Construction, also of Westhampton Beach is doing the actual construction of the new cafeteria.

In addition to the expanded dining hall, the camp will also get a new basement for more storage space. For additional revenue, the camp's dining hall will be available for private catered affairs, such as weddings, meetings and anniversary parties.

But, most important, the new dining hall has enough room to accommodate even the largest of wheelchairs.

"Kids rarely use old-fashioned wheelchairs anymore,"

Ms. Costello added. "Now they've got hi-tech, motor driven, beautiful chairs, which tilt forward, they tilt back and have a wider girth, which is great for our disabled kids, but it has made eating together all at the same time a challenge, and we like to eat family style."

Tom Chieffo, president of the camp's board of directors, pointed out that the camp was built in the 1948 and has seen little in the way of improvement over the years.

That is largely due to the massive \$640,000 it takes each year just to keep the camp up and running, let alone expanding or upgrading the facility.

"And all the money donated to the camp was fundraised," Chieffo said, proudly, noting that as many as 400 campers attend Pa-Qua-Tuck each year. "We've been planning this expansion for the past seven or eight years, but the need goes back even further than that."

The project got thumbs up from Irving Toliver, who is Rotary governor for Rotary International District 7260. Toliver said that there is no other facility like Pa-Qua-Tuck in Suffolk County and praised his fellow Rotarians for their generous gifts of time, effort and money.

"Our district is all of Suffolk County, and I don't know of any other disability camp like this, which is sponsored by the Rotary Club," Toliver said. "This is a really great place to be, but there's still a lot of work to be done."

At camp, children participate in a wide range of activities especially designed for youngsters who are in wheelchairs as well as those who are ambulatory. Activities include swimming, boating, arts and crafts, petting zoo, talent shows, cookouts, games and a Carnival Day.

The program also provides educational activities in areas such as nature, arts, fire safety and communication skills. Based on those merits, camp officials have decided to try and catch the eye of ABC's Extreme Makeover – Home Edition.

Camp officials hired the talents of videographer Robert Frey, of Small Frey Productions, to put together a video about the camp and campers to send to Extreme Makeover.

Frey, who was also recently appointed camp superintendent, said that a few spots of Pa-Qua-Tuck that could not benefit from a few nips and tucks.

"Pretty much everything needs to be done, there's just so much of the camp hasn't been updated, except for electricity here and there," Frey said. "So, the reason we're shooting for Home Make Over is that we need extra help. We can't do it ourselves based just on volunteers and donations." ■

For more information about Camp Pa-Qua-Tuck visit www.camppaquatuck.com



Local dignitaries turned out last Friday to break ground on a new \$400,000 dining hall expansion at Camp Pa-Qua-Tuck in Center Moriches.

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