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From the Los Angeles Times

SUMMER CAMP CAMPAIGN

Rachel gets a chance to be independent

Rachel, 15, learns life skills and can interact with her sight-impaired peers at a Junior Blind camp in Malibu.

By Juliette Funes

July 15, 2009

After doctors told Jeanie Flowers that her 3-month-old daughter, Rachel, was blind, the new mom had to learn how to help the girl cope with her condition. It didn't happen.

At 13, Rachel still didn't know how to brush her teeth, get dressed or tie her shoe laces. Flowers, instead, bought her Velcro shoes, fed her and did most simple tasks for her.

"Living with a blind kid, sometimes it's so much easier to do things for them and to expedite things," she said.

Still, the shy girl was able to foster an identity centering on her musical talent. Playing the piano since she was 2 and the flute since she was 8, Rachel learned her music in Braille or by ear.

Despite reservations, Flowers decided in 2007 to let Rachel spend her first nights away from home at Junior Blind of America's Camp Bloomfield in Malibu.

"I was terrified to let her go," Flowers said. "I knew she needed to take that step, though, and I thought it would be good to do something without Mom hovering over her."

Rachel was able to interact with other blind and partly sighted kids with similar life experiences and even learned how to tie her shoes.

"It was a big step for her not being a kid anymore and learning to do things independently and being responsible for things I never made her responsible for," Flowers said. "It helped me realize I was doing too much for her and she is capable of doing things herself. I just have to give her a chance."

Now 15, Rachel will make her third visit to camp this summer, joining 100 kids ages 14 to 17 who will participate in recreational activities tailored for the blind and visually impaired.

"Each year she gains a little more self-confidence and more independence in her living skills," Flowers said.

Children at Camp Bloomfield are encouraged to dress themselves and make their own beds, said Camille Wheatley, the organization's communications manager. "[At home] they don't necessarily try things because they're afraid they're going to mess up, and at camp they don't have to worry about that," she said. "It gives them a chance to be around kids who understand what they're going through."

With \$1.8 million raised last year by the Los Angeles Times Summer Camp Campaign, approximately 8,000 children will go to camp in Southern California this summer.

The Summer Camp Campaign is part of the Los Angeles Times Family Fund, a McCormick Foundation fund, which matches all donations at 50 cents on the dollar.

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