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From the Los Angeles Times

TIMES SUMMER CAMP CAMPAIGN

In Malibu, a fun site for visually impaired children

Camp Bloomfield gives the youngsters a quintessential summer experience

By Jason Song

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It's hard enough to send a child to summer camp for the first time, much less a boy who has trouble seeing anything 2 inches in front of his face.

"He's very independent. It isn't until he runs into a tree that you realize he can't see," said Yvonne Hrabe, whose son Graham Kope is legally blind and will attend Camp Bloomfield for the visually impaired this July.

About 800 children attend the camp, run by Junior Blind of America, each summer. The event gives campers a chance to ride horses, swim and hike under the supervision of specially trained staffers and an opportunity to make new friends and boost their self-esteem.

"I would like him to be a little more outgoing. He's a little on the shy side," Hrabe said of her 5-year-old.

Hrabe discovered that Graham was legally blind when he was 4 months old. He would scream every time he went outside because the light hurt his eyes. He also has albinism, a lack of pigmentation, which makes him especially sensitive to light.

She and Graham attended the camp in Malibu during a session for families last year, and Hrabe was so impressed that she decided to send her son to camp this summer on his own. All of the nearly 40 camp staffers go through a week of special training during which they learn special communication skills and do camp-related activities blindfolded.

"These counselors were absolutely incredible; they have tons of energy," Hrabe said.

Still, Hrabe said she couldn't help but be a little worried, especially about a dry creek bed.

"It's a 15- or 20-foot drop, and he doesn't know that the land ends and goes down. So that's a concern," she said.

"But he's going to have to grow up and be independent, even more than a sighted child, so it will be a good experience for him," she said.

Berenice Cotera understands Hrabe's apprehension. She was also nervous when she sent her 11-year-old daughter, Triana, who was born blind, to camp for the first time two years ago.

"But it's something that she looks forward to every year. She really loves it there," Cotera said.

This year, Triana's younger brother Luis is going to camp with her. Luis' vision is fine, but he's going so he can spend more time with his sister.

"We're going to have a lot of fun," Triana said.

The Los Angeles Times Summer Camp Campaign gave \$12,000 to the camp last year. Thanks to \$1.7 million raised last year by the campaign, about 8,000 children will go to camp in Southern California this summer.

The annual campaign is part of the Los Angeles Times Family Fund, a fund of the McCormick Tribune Foundation, which matches all donations at 50 cents on the dollar. Unless requested otherwise, the Los Angeles Times Family Fund makes every effort to acknowledge donations of \$100 or more received by Sept. 1 in the newspaper.

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