

2018 OUB / Running Blind Adventure Camp: July 12 – 20

This is the 3rd time that Running Blind has partnered with OUB (Opportunities Unlimited for the Blind) to sponsor and host an Adventure Camp in Northern Michigan. (The previous two were in 2014 and 2016, both which included time in the Charlevoix area.) In previous years I was more involved in the planning and sponsoring of the entire event. This year I played a smaller role largely because that was what I could afford to provide financially, but the portion of the camp I planned and sponsored at Charlevoix was the culmination of the trip so it was an important part of the overall trip and the boating day is definitely a huge popular favorite with both the campers and the staffers.

The 2018 group consisted of 8 visually impaired youth campers (one joined us at Charlevoix, and one left before), 10 youth counselors, all but one of whom are also visually impaired, 3 adult staff members, and 4 adult volunteers, myself as one of them, so 25 people in total, 17 of whom were visually impaired. (This was the biggest group yet for an Adventure Camp – we had 24 in 2015, and 19 on the canoe trip in 2016.)



Pictured – back row: Gwen Botting (OUB Director), Max (B1 camper), Elijah (B1 camper), Jules (B1 camper), Avery (b1 camper), Hailey (B3 staff), Teniqwuia (B3 staff),
Middle row: Olivia (B1 camper), Autumn (B1 camper), Grace (B1 camper), Jenni (B1 staff), Esther (B3 staff), Halen (B3 camper), Sheila (sighted vol),
Front row (kneeling): Cali (B3 camper), Aric (B3 camper), Angela (B3 camper), Andrew (B1 staff), Tallin (B3 staff); **sitting:** Mike (sighted vol)

not pictured: Emmie (B1 Staff), Becca (sighted staff), Rob (Sighted medical officer, staff), Sheila (Sighted medical officer, staff), Hal (sighted vol), Eric (sighted vol)

Trip Report

Day 1 - Thursday July 12: The trip started when most of the group met in Grand Rapids at Camp Optimist (where most OUB's summer camps were held) and left for the Upper Peninsula. There were stops along the way and the group eventually made their way to up to the UP and to Otter Lake Campground near Munising. Getting camp set up with a lot of people that aren't overly experienced with camping is a challenge. Throw in the fact that most of them are also blind and that adds a whole other dimension to the challenge, but that's what this trip is about – stretching boundaries. With some concerted effort and cooperation and lots of questions, the tents were eventually set up and sleeping assignments were doled out and the group bedded down for the night after a long day.

Day 2 - Friday: the group spent much of the day at the Clear Lake Education Center, and after lunch spent some time at Miner's Falls and the nearby Beach on Lake Superior. The group loved the falls as you can actually walk behind it, or under it if you want a shower! And many of the kids did go wading there. (Lake Superior water is still cold, but not quite as cold as it used to be it seems. Score one for global warming I guess.)



Angie and Jules getting their hands wet in Miner's Falls.



Wading in Lake Superior at the Miner's Falls area.



Day 3 - Saturday: On Saturday the group was lead by OUB activity director Hailey in some crafts work that she had prepared ahead of time. After lunch they took a ride on 4 wheelers down to the beach (which the kids all loved!) and had dinner there on the beach.



Teniqwua, Olivia, Grace, Hailey on ORV ride (Off Road Vehicle!)



Lunch time!

Day 4 - Sunday: after breakfast the group got loaded in the vans and headed to Hurricane River for a hike to the lighthouse there. After lunch they headed to Camp Hiawatha for some boating and a dinner they provided. (Camp Hiawatha is both a Boy Scout and general youth summer camp.) The dinner experience was shared with a lot of other campers attending the camp, so it was a bit hectic, but with patience, it worked out.



Group shot at the lighthouse.

Day 5 – Monday: the group packed lunches and spent the day at the Seney Wildlife Sanctuary learning about and observing wildlife. This was a fantastic opportunity for the kids as there are stuffed animals and animal furs for the kids (and staffers) to touch.



Olivia with stuffed skunk at Seney Wildlife Refuge, and Esther with a bear (also stuffed!)

Day 6 - Tuesday: the group packed up, loaded the trailers, and headed for Mackinaw City. They had time to tour Fort Michilimackinac as we did 4 years ago. This is a great stop and is both fun and interesting. The group learned about the history of the area including fur trading, lumbering, military, and were treated to demonstrations of cannon and musket fire. I arrived this day and checked out situation at Whiting Park where we would camp at Charlevoix, and also met a new volunteers who was joining the group to help with the water activities – Eric, who is a student at Grand Valley State & met Gwen at a Lions Club meeting and volunteers to help out for the Charlevoix part of the camp.



Eric and I drove to Boyne Falls and met the group there for dinner there where we had a restaurant meal of good ol' pizza. Having prepared food vs cooking over stoves and in the fire was a welcome relief for the group, and it's always looked forward to by the kids. Before digging into the pizza that I had ordered and ready for them, the group sang one of their silly but amusing camp songs. Doing stuff like that is a great part of going to camp, and so it was here also. Then it was time to feast on the pizza.

After dinner, the group headed to Whiting Park on Lake Charlevoix and set up camp there for the next 3 days. I helped get the trailers situated and disconnected (not a simple task for the large trailer with a complicated Drawtite system that was used). After getting set up we called it a night as the next day would be a busy one.

Day 7 – Wednesday: I started by checking out the beach with Eric for the boating day, and then we unloaded the 2 grills I brought along with me. After that we rounded up the campers and headed up the hill to a grassy area that we would use to do some guided running using tethers and voice instructions. We didn't run far, but did a number of ~100 yard runs back and forth across the field. And it worked out great. One particular young man (Max) was sitting in a lump and initially refused to even stand up. Someone said that sometimes they just lift him up, so I grabbed him under the arms and did exactly that, and in no time I had him running along side of me, and he had a great time – although

with some obvious issues with biomechanics. (That is a fairly common problem for blind people, especially if they are totally blind and have been so since birth.) I coached him and others to try to have a more fluid stride and use proper arm swing, but it's a long term challenge that will take time to conquer. But others ran surprisingly well, and one of the campers even mentioned that she ran on her track team which is awesome, and another said she was interested in doing that, which was also great to hear.

When we got back to the campground, had a quick lunch, loaded up the vans (which always an adventure by itself) and headed off for the rafting trip with Jordan Valley Outfitters in East Jordan. A couple of words here about rafting on the Jordan River - it's a challenge. It's deemed a "natural river" so they do minimal clearing of deadfall trees. (They want to maintain habitat for fish and water fowl.) Due to this the river can have some tricky spots, and it is apt to be different from year to year. In a canoe or a kayak it works with some skill and effort. With rafts it's a bit tougher - even with a decent amount of skill, it can sometimes end up a bit like a pinball game bouncing down the river bouncing off trees, rocks, the bank. But we did it 4 years ago, and with some effort we did just fine, and in fact it was one of the high points of the trip for some.

This year we had 21 rafters so we split up into 3 groups of 7. I made sure that in addition to myself, we had two other sighted and capable people to guide the rafts in the stern - Mike and Eric. I gave each of them some coaching on the techniques for maneuvering a raft, which does work, but takes some moxie and at times bumping into things is simply going to happen. And certainly safety is the main priority, such as looking out for trees and branches to duck under. So after some instruction for the guides, we split up the group and loaded up the rafts.



One of the rafts on the Jordan river.

I started in the back, but fairly soon my raft drifted a head of the other two. We also had Becca (the staff lifeguard) in a kayak as a safety measure. When we got to the half way point we stopped along the bank and waited for the others. It took a while but the other two rafts made it in 10 minutes or so. They had had some trouble with navigating the windy river, but they made it and every thing seemed fine. I had brought along a lot of snacks and water bottles so we handed them out. It was a beautiful day, close to 70 degrees and sunny, and gliding down the river with the current doing most of the work while listening to the water gurgle and the birds calling overhead was wonderful. I thought (and hoped) that the 2nd half would be easier than the first, but unfortunately that turned out not to be the case, as there were a couple of tight spots with downed trees that made getting through a bit of a tight squeeze. I had taken the lead to make sure no one overshot the take-out point, and we got there and waited for the other two rafts. The second one made it and they were fine. The third one however was farther back and as I heard they struggled a bit and got stuck on a log at one point. (Actually we did also – probably the same log. We got off with a push from my foot it without too much trouble.)

When the third showed up, we discovered there was a problem. Becca, who had been in the kayak, had spilled once or twice, but also had gotten more wet and chilled when she was helping the 3rd raft get unstuck. Even though it was a warm day and she had on a life jacket, she got chilled, and was quite anxious about it. After getting everyone out, there were some tense moments as Becca was not warming-up even in a van with engine running and the heater on high, so it was decided to take her to the ER to get her warmed up and stabilized just in case. (OUB has a medical staffer who made that decision.) So they headed off to the hospital while the rest of us went in to East Jordan for dinner. The dinner was at a nice restaurant and was supposed to be the reward for getting done with the rafting, but given that a number of people weren't there due to the hospital run, and others were stressed out over the rafting, things were a bit tense, which was unfortunate. After dinner we headed back to camp. We eventually heard that Becca was doing fine – but she had been chilled and may have had a mild dose of hypothermia, but she was discharged and made it back to camp later that night, so that was good news.

Day 8 – Thursday: the day started a bit slowly as we all slept in a bit. This was the last day, and we didn't have anything planned except for boating with the large pontoon I rented, and of course tubing behind it for those that wanted to. This was the camp finale and the kids LOVE the boating! And the pontoon boats in use these days are far from the lumbering martini boats of the past. They have huge outboard motors on them and can haul ass, and easily pull tubers. Eric and I headed into town to get the rental boat. They gave us the once over on how to use it, and we headed off down the lake to our camp. The boat could hold 14 people, so we got the first group loaded and headed off down the lake. The kids and staffers both love it on the boat, and it was another beautiful day, so everyone was having a great time, which was a welcome relief after the troubles rafting. We soon got the tube in the water and loaded it up and started the fun. It was a 3 person tube, and most everyone enjoyed getting wet and doing that. In fact Max, who had been quite introverted much of the time, came out of his shell in a big way – he loved tubing so much that we actually had a hard time getting him off the tube – he was a natural for it!



The group enjoying time on the beautiful pontoon boat. Pictured L to R is: Olivia, Avery, Max, Eric, Andrew, Cali, Halen (and Becca behind Halen).

After round one, we switched groups and went for round two. The wind had started kicking up and it was getting a bit rougher on the lake, but the tubing was still fine, but the tube had a tendency to rock in the waves when people were trying to load, and one girl got frightened and decided not to go, which was fine, but a bit sad. Charlevoix is a big lake, so the afternoon breeze does often whip up some waves. After round two we headed back and had time for one more round, so anyone that wanted a second ride was taken back out – Max was on this ride for sure and he got in a couple more rides on the tube. It was amazing to see the transformation in him – it’s exactly the kind of outcome that we hope to get on a trip like this, but rarely to we get such a poignant example of it as was displayed by Max, so that was really great to see. The others all had a lot of fun also. The only incident we had on the boat that caused a moment of concern was when we drifted over the tow rope while loading up a the tube and it got wrapped around the prop. That is a fairly common problem, one that every experienced boater knows to watch out for, and it shouldn’t happen if you are careful, and it can cause damage to the motor and more likely the rope, so what can I say – I lapsed! And while we were stalled we were drifting at a good rate towards shore, which also isn’t good, so I jumped in right quick and managed to get it unwrapped pretty quickly with no damage to the motor or the rope, which was good as we were able to keep right on tubing down the lake, which we did. (Most likely with Max on the tube!)



Calli, Emmie (staffers) and Angela (camper) on tube getting read for a pull!



Max, Angela and Teniqwua tubing down the lake (and loving it!)

After the 3rd tubing run, the afternoon was pretty well shot, and we headed in. Eric and I had to return the boat, so we did that and headed back to camp where I found a hungry crew so I got out the grub and cranked up the grills for the big BBQ. That has become the tradition at the camp, and I provide a bountiful BBQ for the final night. We had burgers, brats, chicken, potato salad, tossed salad, munchies, and drinks. It took a while to grill everything, but no one (including me!) walked away hungry, that's for sure. And to top off the long day, I had s'more fixings ready and all of the kids were treated to the melted marshmallow camper's delight.

At that point we started getting the trailers ready to break camp the next morning, so I again helped with the big trailer and got that all hooked up to the truck and ready to go with some good help from Mike. A bit more bad news was that Becca had also hit her head at some point during the river run in her kayak, and she had to go back to the hospital for a possible concussion. She was again released and able to head back home with the group, but she was not allowed to drive, so they had to lase a car at Charlevoix and come back for it later. (There were just about exactly enough drivers for all of the vehicles. Getting enough sighted staffers and volunteers is always a challenge for camps like this.) But with that contingency made, the group made it safely back to Grand Rapids and the kids got picked up by their parents and the staffers spent a few days getting the equipment dried, checked and stowed, and also some important decompressing (during which some grouching always occurs – that's part of the process) and after that, they most all headed home. A couple of them were actually staying with Gwen semi-permanently, as she has graciously opened her home to some of the young visually impaired people who were in need of a stable environment to call home for the time being. (Gwen has a visually impaired (adult) son and a very big heart.)

Final thoughts:

As should be no surprise to anyone, people with visual impairments face big life challenges, including mobility, security, and employment among others. It is impossible for them to do things as quickly as sighted people, especially if they are totally blind. Packing things up, moving from place to place, even going to the bathroom takes far more time for people with visual impairments. That's reality, and needs to be accommodated and planned for in the itinerary and in the daily schedule. With experience and the proper planning, it all worked out, but not without constant effort and daily challenges. That is a reality for everyone when facing challenges in new surroundings with activities that most are not experienced with, but is a far greater consideration for blind people – that's part of the primary challenge with the camp, and provides me with a short term slice of the challenges that the blind face every day of their life with no reprieve. The medical issues with Becca were very unfortunate, but the camp was still a big success, and in fact one of the best ones according to Gwen. The main lesson learned was that the Jordon River is not good choice for this group, even with sighted guides. Future rafting trips will be on less demanding rivers and there will also need more effort to recruit guides that have more experience with canoes or navigational experience with rafts. So live and learn. It turned out to be a kinda tough trip for me, but other than the unfortunate problems that Becca encountered, it was a great trip for the kids and the most of the staffers. (And not to be deterred, I'm working with Gwen for a 2019 adventure camp, likely in southern Ohio.)

Thanks for your support, both moral and financial, and I hope you consider supporting us again in the future. We really need it and we put all our donations to good use. – Hal

More pictures - 9 pages!



Fun in the ATV's!



Ranger lecture on the beach.



Ranger tactile display, and a group shot at Fort Michilimackinac.





Fun decorating (and eating!) cookies!



Hailey at the lighthouse and more shots of tactile displays at Seney Wildlife Refuge. (Esther & skunk!)





Tactile demonstration with pine bows. Teniqwua is checking out the needles in picture on the right.



Group fun in the water in Lake Superior at Miner's beach. Elijah is whooping it up in picture on the left.



More fun at Miner's waterfall.





Lots of fun out on the boat and the tube! (Below is Teniqwua, Emmie (on top) and Esther.





Angela, Teniqwia and Eric on the tube – and Eric hamming it up below!





Clapping to Eric's (youthful!) music election.



Yours truly driving the boat and loving life.



Farwell until next year - the end!