

Mersea Island Festival – the ‘Can Do’ Camp

Sophie Weaver

I recently had the opportunity and pleasure of visiting the Mersea Island Festival. Before you get confused, no this wasn't the renowned Food and Drink Festival; The Mersea Island Festival is an annual camp for disabled people, held at Essex Outdoors Mersea (formerly known as East Mersea Youth Camp). The Festival Co-ordinator had invited any Councillors who like to visit to see the activities and even try some out. This was a councillor duty to be enjoyed!

The Mersea Island Festival camp started in 1981, which was Britain's 'Year of the Disabled'. People, myself included, may remember it as a Phab camp (Phab being a national organisation bringing together physically disabled and able-bodied people to do activities together.)

The Mersea Island Festival camp is attended by many who face disadvantage. Each year in excess of 300 attend the camps, about 60% of whom have some form of impairment or disability. The Festival brings together people from all backgrounds in a setting that encourages tolerance, acceptance, empathy, kindness and thoughtfulness, all rolled into a week of endless fun and amazing activities. What I have found from my somewhat limited experience of the camp, is that no matter what the disability, or ability, there is something for everyone to participate in.

The camp is set up and run by a group of dedicated volunteers – enthusiastic young people and professional nurses, social and youth workers working together in all aspects of the camp to make sure that everyone can get the most from their stay.

The camp is always during the week leading up to August Bank Holiday weekend, and includes the weekend too. It is in fact 2 camps that run back to back so people can opt for the camp in the week, or the weekend, or both together. There is a wide range of inclusive

activities for all - from dancing, singing, circus skills and being creative in the Art Tent, to wall climbing in a wheelchair, water skiing, archery and swimming.

On the morning that I went along there were many of these activities all going on. It had been suggested that as part of my visit, maybe I'd like to try wall climbing and/or the zipwire. I'm always up for doing something a bit different, but was slightly hesitant about how it would all work. As a wheelchair user myself, I know many things are possible, but with my limited upper body strength I really couldn't



imagine trying to pull myself up an almost vertical wall in my wheelchair! My doubts started to change however, once I was taken over to the climbing wall where another wheelchair user was already undertaking the challenge. On seeing that the ropes and the fully trained volunteers pulled the wheelchair up the wall, I felt that all I needed to worry about was not screaming at the height of the wall summit. The volunteers, all trained in using the specialist equipment, explained how it all worked. I was concerned at having to be in another, much larger, wheelchair than my own. But no worries. Out came lots of different padded cushions to fit around me. The reason for having to use this other wheelchair was safety: it had been slightly adapted with

additions to the frame where the necessary clamps and ropes could be safely attached. One of the volunteers, coincidentally one of Mersea's rugby team, known as 'Windy' talked me through every step. He put me completely at ease. Before being transferred into the climbing chair, a harness was put on me, up and under my legs to hold me safely through the transfer and whilst being hoisted up the wall in the wheelchair. Once I was all hooked up, transferred into the climbing chair, and finally safety helmet on, this was it, no going back. As they tilted the wheelchair

at the top of the wall I had just been up, so quite high. This time I was transferred into a moulded canvas seat. Once all the ropes and clamps were attached and checked I was slowly pulled backwards up the zipwire to the top. This time I really got a sense of the height as everyone on the ground became further away. The view across the camp in the East Mersea fields was amazing. Once at the top, I was released and slid down the zipwire. The experience was totally exhilarating. A pull at the ropes and I'm brought to a stop at the bottom. Again although it wasn't me doing the work, I felt a sense of achievement, doing something out of my comfort zone of my wheelchair.

My experiences are typical of what this incredible camp, the Mersea Island Festival, is all about: enabling people, whatever their ability, to try something they would not normally do. There is such a wide ranging choice of activities, but ideas and offers to run an activity are always welcome. For example, this year a representative from Lush ran a massage session with free hand massages, and a trained trampoline instructor ran a session.

The success of the Festival and its continuation relies on the dedication of the volunteers and fundraising as there are costs involved that cannot all be covered by the camp fees. Between this year's camp and next there will much activity behind the scenes, in both fundraising and recruiting volunteers. Next time you see or hear anything about Mersea Island Festival, do lend your support. If you want to get involved, either as a volunteer, or to offer an activity, or would like to help raise funds, do get in touch either by telephoning the Festival Co-ordinator Phil Ager on 01206 383226 or email info@merseafestival.org.uk

For me the Mersea Island Festival is another little known gem of Mersea that shouldn't be a secret. From my own personal experience, I think I can say that the Festival really is a week that makes a difference to everyone involved. Want to try something different? Yes you can!

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