



A VACC camper and pal enjoy Miami Beach's famous South Beach, opposite page; pictured here, a young camper experiences weightlessness and the camp's swimming pool.

VOLUNTEERS AND DONATIONS

Over 100 volunteers from the local community make the camp possible every year. "This is something we do part time," Klein says. "We squeeze this into our lives as a labor of love."

Volunteers are given their assignment and together they make the program work. Teen pals play with the children and make them feel like part of the group. The operations crew runs the camp, cooks, cleans, and makes sure that everyone knows where they should be and what they should be doing. Special volunteers provide activities and entertainment, from clowns and puppet shows to live music and kite flying. The medical volunteers, although most do not function in their professional capacity unless there is an emergency, are a reassurance to campers and their families. Nurses, who watch the children for 12-hour shifts at night so that the parents can get a full night's sleep, are the only volunteers who work as medical professionals.

"The program is run on love, not money," Klein says. Aside from a few donations and interest from an endowment that was set up by Simpson through Miami Children's Hospital, the program is completely funded by donations and the time and participation of local volunteers.

While all the volunteers have a very special experience, Klein says the therapists and technicians leave camp with an impression that dramatically impacts the way they

approach their work. "We relate to everyone as people, as personalities," Klein explains. "For the therapists, this is not their normal orientation. They are used to looking at the disease and at the equipment... It's a real eye opener for the therapists."

HOW TO START A CAMP

Simpser is ready to see programs like VACC multiply and he has prepared a book that explains how others can build a similar camp. "We want every patient, not only children who are discharged from the hospital with a ventilator, to get out and see what they can do," Simpser is confident that this type of camp, whether for 1 single day, 1 week, or 1 month, gives these families hope for a more active and rewarding life.

A free copy of the book is available by calling the Division of Pulmonary Medicine, Miami Children's Hospital, at (305) 662-8380. "We hope that people will be able to duplicate our program without going through all of the heartaches that we went through," Simpser says. You can have as much fun playing with these patients as taking care of them, he believes. "Hopefully, every state will have a camp when they get the manual." □

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WHO CAN ATTEND?

Children with tracheostomies, ventilators and/or oxygen therapy, and their families are encouraged to attend the weeklong VACC Camp '96, to be held April 9-15, 1996, in a handicapped-friendly Metro-Dade County, Fla. park. RCPs are encouraged to refer patients; the deadline to register overnight campers is January 5, 1996.

Because one of the camp's primary goals is to provide social interaction, children must be at least 5 years old, or have the capabilities of a 5-year-old, with normal cognitive and verbal ability or other means of communication, and enough energy and stamina to enjoy 5- to 7-hour field trips. The camp accommodates approximately 40 people. Seven to 10 of those are families from out of state who stay overnight at the site. Local families attend the camp during the day and go home in the evenings. For more information, call BELA at (305) 662-8222 or (305) 662-8380. □

him how her child was able to enjoy swimming. Using a plastic plug, she covered her child's tracheostomy tube and went into the water. The plug created a tight seal over the child's tube so that no water was able to penetrate. Her child was able to swim without complications. Simpser contacted a company that manufactures tracheal tubes and asked them to create a water-tight plug. With plenty of supervision and the plug in place, ventilator-dependent children have logged in more than 10,000 hours in the camp's pool.

According to Simpser, a ventilator cap allows the children to not only experience the water from the shoulders down, but to go under as well. The feeling of weightlessness for children who have always felt the pressure of gravity pushing their bodies against a wheelchair or bed is an incredible relief and an experience that they now can experience again and again.



Campers and volunteers join in a line dance lesson.