

Fairfax Station ❖ Clifton

CONNECTION

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A KEEN Place To Play

Fairfax Station man volunteers organization that helps special needs children to play.

BY AMBER HEALY
THE CONNECTION

Ehab Hammad spends his days working as a senior vice president for PNC Bank in Washington, D.C. dealing with clients and spending long hours in his office helping adults make good financial decisions.

On the weekend, however, he's more likely to be found running around, playing soccer or baseball with special needs children, his own two teenage sons in tow.

Hammad, a Fairfax Station resident, is a volunteer with Kids Enjoy Exercise Now, or KEEN, a Maryland-based agency that provides free classes and recreational programs for children with any number of develop-

mental or physical disabilities.

"The cause touches me a lot," said Hammad, who has an autistic 13-year-old nephew who lives in his native Egypt.

KEEN provides special needs children with up to an hour and a half of physical activity, like tennis, bowling or swimming, or music lessons, giving their parents and chance to run errands, catch up with friends or just relax, all at no charge to the family.

"When a parent has one free hour a week to drop off their child and not worry about them, it makes a big difference," said Hammad. "It means a lot to me to help out."

The children are matched up individually with a "coach" or volunteer, who spends the

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KEEN athletes and volunteers line up for a giant game of tug-of war mid-way through the annual KEEN Sports Festival at Hadley's Playground in Potomac, Md.

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KEEN Program Promotes Play

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time playing games according to their "athlete's" abilities, skills and interests, he said.

On Sunday, June 4, KEEN organized its annual Sports Festival at Hadley's Playground in Falls Road Park in Potomac, Md., and Hammad said more volunteers were in attendance for their version of the Olympics than athletes.

Hammad took his two sons, ages 12 and 17, with him to the Sports Festival on Sunday and was happy at how quickly they fell in love with helping the younger special needs children.

"Sometimes people really struggle with disabled kids, but I think kids need to be seen as normal people," Hammad said. "My 17-year-old son isn't afraid anymore, he knows that he can communicate and play with these kids. It's important to plant this kind of seed with teenagers."

Hammad's athlete on Sunday was William, a 23-year-old man who wanted nothing more than to play soccer. After a few games, William decided he wanted to play baseball, and Hammad obliged.

"We went through this obstacle course and it was difficult for the volunteers, but William did a fantastic job," Hammad said. "He never gave up."

All the athletes who participated in the Sports Festival received a medal, Hammad said, but the sports weren't organized to be competitive.

"We can't measure what we accomplished but it's fantastic," he said.

KEEN WAS STARTED in England in 1988 by Elliott Portnoy, a graduate of New College in Oxfordshire, said Beata Okulska of the Washington area chapter.

"When he moved to the U.S., he looked for a similar organization to join but there wasn't one," Okulska said. The first American KEEN branch opened in 1992, and programs are available in Kansas City, Chicago, St. Louis, Los Angeles and Washington, D.C.

"We welcome every child into our program regardless of their disability," Okulska said. About 80 percent of the almost 200 children currently involved at KEEN are autistic, but some have cerebral palsy or some form of mental retardation.

Okulska is the only full-time staff member for the 11 facilities involved with the Washington branch of KEEN, which she runs out of her Bethesda home.

Gymnasium space, swimming pools, tennis courts

and other facilities are rented out for use by KEEN and its athletes, she said, the most recent being a swimming program at the William H. Rumsey Aquatic Center near the Eastern Market Metro station and a sports program at Payne Elementary School near the Potomac Metro Station, both in Southeast Washington.

A tennis program has been established at Four Star Tennis Academy in Merrifield, which opens its courts to athletes for an hour once a month, Okulska said.

"All programs are offered free of charge thanks to very generous private sponsors," she said. "For most families, the hour their child is with us is respite time for them."

FOR PARENTS LIKE Megan O'Boyle and Denise Cormaney, dropping their children off with KEEN gives them a chance to catch up with each other and run errands.

"When we first went to KEEN, I expected to have to fill out a whole bunch of paperwork and give a full verbal dissertation on Shannon's allergies, her likes and dislikes," said O'Boyle, an Arlington resident whose 5-year-old daughter has a rare condition with autism-like characteristics.

"We got there and everyone was so upbeat and enthusiastic, it was awesome," O'Boyle said. "I remember walking out of the building feeling like I'd left her with a bunch of happy strangers for free and knowing she'd be safe."

Every time she has returned with her daughter, the experience gets better, O'Boyle said, plus she's getting some well-needed time to herself.

Many times, O'Boyle will spend the 90 minutes with her friends who first told her about the program, including Denise Cormaney.

"Not only does KEEN provide a good, quality opportunity for my son to be himself, it's nice for us to feel like we're a part of a community," said Cormaney, whose 6-year-old son is autistic.

A "very physical child," Alex loves singing the Hokey Pokey at the end of each session, Cormaney laughed.

A trip to Maryland twice a month for an hour and a half of playtime is not an inconvenience for these mothers, who believe the time their children spend playing is worth driving much further to secure.

"Once your kids get past the age of taking afternoon naps, you have a long day to fill," Cormaney said. "These people at KEEN are saints."

More

For more information on KEEN, go to www.keengreaterdc.org.