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OC Bike Camp helps special needs kids and young adults gain independence, new skills



Camper Mark Nguyen, left, makes progress with the help of volunteers Kael and Cole at OC Bike Camp, held at Soka University Aug. 6-10. (Courtesy of UCP of Orange County)

By **MICHELLE NEWBLOM** | Orange County Register

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ALISO VIEJO — Orange County Bike Camp celebrated its 11th year by teaching 40 individuals to ride a bike during its weeklong camp held Aug. 6-10 at Soka University.

OC Bike Camp is an 11-year collaboration between Down Syndrome Association of Orange County and UCP of Orange County, in partnership with iCanShine.

More than 400 Southern California children and adults with disabilities have learned to ride a two-wheeled bike from the camp in the past decade. Not only is riding a bike fun and a “rite-of-passage” for many, it also fosters self-confidence and independence for kids such as Jaden Savill, 13, who has Down syndrome.

Ben Savill, Jaden’s father, is thankful for the event and what it has taught his son.

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"Getting his own bike and helmet really helped motivate Jaden. When I took him to our local bike trail to practice on Saturday after camp, he was very scared. But I reminded him how much he'd loved Bike Camp and how brave and successful he had been," Savill said. "And I am very happy to report that after a nervous few days, Jaden is now riding independently, and his confidence is growing with each passing day."

This year boasted 40 riders, ages 8-19, with around 80 volunteers. It takes two to three volunteers to work as spotters with each rider and the bike-riding process involves multiple stages to accommodate individuals.

Kristi Golden, program director at Down Syndrome Association, was thrilled with how this year's camp went.

"This year we had an extraordinary group of volunteers," Golden said. "They create relationships with their riders and give them moral support as well as physical support."

The camp puts individuals in a high-energy environment with lots of volunteers and specialized bikes that they cannot fall off. The bikes feature a rolling pin on the back, giving the rider more stability without the wobbliness of training wheels. The back roller gets replaced by successively more wobbly rollers and they start riding two-wheelers after they build endurance.

As the kids gain confidence, they're taught how to lean into turns and build speed. Riders are placed in the front of a tandem bike with an experienced bike coach in the back. After they get used to riding two-wheelers in the gym, they progress to outside.

"This method takes apart bicycle riding to the smallest degree and allows someone who hasn't been successful to be 100 percent successful," Golden said.

Elizabeth Beas, director of development for UCP of Orange County, found many special moments throughout the week.

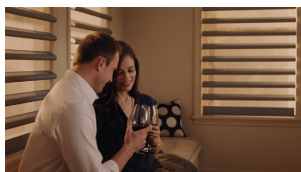
"On Monday, just getting onto a bike is a big accomplishment for many of our riders," Beas said. "By Friday, most riders are on their own two-wheel bikes, cruising around outside with huge smiles on their faces."

The week-long training was capped with an award ceremony on Friday after each session.

"The award ceremony is also a favorite of mine. This year, our volunteers made a celebration tunnel for the riders and signed their award certificate," Beas said. "It was the perfect way to commemorate the week."

Nearly a third of this year's volunteers had volunteered in the past and decided to return. Beas believes the camp is great for the community and they have already begun to plan their dates for next year.

"OC Bike Camp is truly a community endeavor, and volunteers, riders and parents walk away with incredible memories, and often new friendships."



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