

Camp gives chance to rise above bi-polar disorder

By Karen Billing

Trevor Ives is really riding the wave. At Fletcher Cove last week, he looked like the average Californian beach bum, boogie boarding and having the time of his life. No one would have been able to tell it was the Cincinnati, Ohio native's first time on the board, an unforgettable summer camp experience brought to him by Camp Rise Above.

Camp Rise Above, a camp that caters to children with bi-polar disorders, is one of only two camps of its kind in the entire country. The camp's goal is for all of the kids to really enjoy a summer camp experience. Taking Ives' smiles into account, it looks as though they have reached their goal in their second year.

The inspiring summer camp is run by Club Xcite, a youth mentorship service based in Solana Beach and Step Up 4 Kids, a non-profit foundation that seeks to support children and teens with early onset bi-polar disorder. While based in Massachusetts, Step Up 4 Kids was co-founded by Kelley Kupfer, a Rancho Santa Fe resident, nurse and mother to a bi-polar child.

Camp Rise Above starts every day at San Dieguito Park and heads out on field trip to places like Balboa Park. They also went sailing one day, pretending they were pirates shooting out canon balls. Fridays are beach days when they boogie

board, learn to surf, play volleyball and dodgeball.

Through all of their activities the kids are being challenged, they are learning how to cope, to manage emotions and deal with fears and anxieties. Earlier during the week at the Wave Water Park, kids were having fun but they were also learning to deal with fears of water, crowds and slides.

"It's a way for them to be together, nobody's excluded or made to feel different," said Kupfer. "Camp is way for them to be regular kids and have a good time in the summer."

Pre-camp, there is a lot of legwork to be done — the camp is given histories and doctor's notes on each camper and every counselor and mentor is trained on how to work with the children. The counselors and mentors are diligent, monitoring the kids so closely they can tell immediately when one is getting knotted up, feeling anxious.

"We don't wait for the meltdown," said mentor John Foletta. "We see it building and we get there and help them."

At the end of the week, each camper receives a video of his or her camp adventures.

"It's really an opportunity to create a positive memory for these children," said Stefan Hochfilzer, Club Xcite president. "Our success here is going to have a lot to do with other camps that get started."

Solana Beach native



KAREN BILLING

Trevor Ives Boogie boards at Fletcher Cove as part of Camp Rise Above, a summer camp for bi-polar children run by Club Xcite and Step Up 4 Kids.

Hochfilzer started Club Xcite in 2001. At the time, he was only 21, a recent UC Berkeley graduate. While he got his degree in business, he had worked with kids his entire life, mostly teaching tennis lessons.

"I always had a passion to work with kids who have it harder than the average child," Hochfilzer said.

Club Xcite's goal is to pair kids who struggle in some way, be it academically, socially or athletically, with mentors who can help out with anything from math tutoring to learning to surf. The organization seeks to help kids cope with a variety of issues, be it that they

are just having trouble finding friends at school or those who have more severe emotional and behavioral challenges like ADHD or bi-polar disorder.

"We take a non-therapeutic, non-clinical mentorship approach," Hochfilzer said.

Club Xcite tailors mentorships around the concerns and needs expressed by their parents—no two mentorships are the same, except for that they each revolve around positive reinforcement.

"We use their time with mentors to break through all the stigmas," said Foletta, a friend of Hochfilzer from Berkeley who is Xcite's vice president.

mentorship starts, Xcite sits down with parents and any other professionals in children's lives to come up with a solid plan and a goal to work toward. Performance tracking sheets are filled out every two weeks to chart what is working and what is not. Hochfilzer said parents appreciate the malleable approach of the program, that the plan can be adjusted to better meet a child's needs.

On the weekends they also have a small group environment that has been very successful, getting a group of seven to 10 kids with three to four mentors together to have fun and make friends.

"We really see them come out of their shell," said Foletta. "There's a lot of growth, not just little steps, it's leaps and bounds that they make."

In the summer, they hold weeklong camps that have a similar approach to the group programs. It's a 3:1 ratio of campers to mentor so kids get personalized attention and lots of positive reinforcement as they go about activities like sea kayaking or rock climbing.

Camp Rise Above will offer a second week of camp on Aug. 18-22. To learn more camp, visit stepup4kids.com. For information on Club Xcite summer camps or mentorship programs, visit excite-way.com.

Hochfilzer said his mentors are amazing people, from college students focusing on educational psychology, social work or counseling to teachers who are willing to put in extra time. As mentors are matched up with students with similar interests it can be a very enriching experience for both child and mentor, they are really able to build a relationship.

"It's a different philosophy of working with kids that doesn't exist anywhere else in San Diego," Hochfilzer said.

Primarily mentors meet with the kids at their homes two to three times a week for two hours. Before a