

New Y swim class fun for all

Just a few months ago, 7-year-old Erin Leslie was terrified to get into a swimming pool. Now – it's all she talks about, thanks to a new specialized group swim class for children with developmental disabilities at the Mansfield Area Y. Her grandmother calls the change in Erin "magic."

"This summer she didn't even want to go into the water, and here she's doing just remarkably well because they (the instructors) just know how to deal with this child," says Mary Leslie.

The free swim class is offered each Thursday from 5 p.m. – 5:45 p.m. The instructors are Michelle Deibig and Court Sturts, both Richland Newhope employees. They're volunteering their services so participants don't have to pay a fee. You don't even have to be a member of the Y.

Michelle, a habilitation technician at Raintree, also teaches water aerobics at the Y. She suggested the specialized swim class to accommodate children like her 6-year-old nephew, Jakob Hayes, who uses a wheelchair.

"We're teaching basic skills – floating, kicking, blowing bubbles, how to reach back to the side if they would ever fall in," says Michelle. "The kids are so enthusiastic, energetic, and extremely happy and excited to be in the water. You can see that in everything they do."

The first seven-week session featured six different students ranging in age from seven to 20. Parents and guardians must be in the pool area and are even encouraged to get in the water, especially if an individual needs extra help. In addition to Michelle and Court, a Y life guard also assists with the classes, which can accommodate up to 12 students. Classes are tailored to meet the needs of the individuals, and you can join at any time.

"Court and Michelle are so dedicated to helping these children learn to be comfortable in the water," says Cristen Gilbert, Director of Membership & Aquatic Services at the Y. "The families and children absolutely love the class."

Erin, who attends Western Elementary in Lexington, wears a prosthetic leg as she makes her way through the Y pool. When she was born, the umbilical cord was wrapped around her right leg, forcing doctors to amputate it. Her left side is affected by Cerebral Palsy. Swimming has given her confidence both in and out of the water.

"She was kind of reticent about everything. It is scary for a child, especially with her problem. Here she feels normal," says her grandmother.

"I've taught swim lessons for a long time when I was a teenager. This is the most rewarding class because the whole time they're excited just to be doing something," Michelle says. "They're just happy to be in the water and moving around."

To find out more about the swim class, contact the Mansfield Area Y at 419-522-3511.



Erin Leslie enjoys swimming at the Y