

The Free Lance-Star

August 13, 2016

Children with Disabilities try water sports at Lake of the Woods event

BY LINDLEY ESTES

Gavin Brodie says, “yeah,” and shrugs like a typical teenager when asked if he likes to water ski.

But taking to the water, whether its skiing, tubing or knee-boarding at Lake of the Woods, he lights up with pure joy.

Gavin is 15 years old and has Down Syndrome. According to his parents who brought him to an adaptive water sports event at the lake Saturday, he continually surprises them.

“As a parent you think will he ever sip through a straw, will he ever walk,” his mother, Judy Brodie, said. “To see him like this, it’s amazing to think he would be water-skiing. People have such low expectations, but I say don’t ever lower your expectations.”



Robin Richardson (left) and Emma Freeman (right) help Alex Berg, 10, waterski using a seat for adaptive waterskiing. The Lake of the Woods Adaptive Watersports Foundation hosted a free event on Saturday.

“We all live on the lake,” Levinstein said. “This way we can give them something we take for granted: being able to walk out of the back door and ski.”

The adaptive skis have a seat and are flanked by two skiers who ensure the participant’s safety.

“Everyone can do it, whether they are paraplegic, paralyzed or have an intellectual disability,” she said.

Jordy DeBoer, another board member, said, “We have the lake in our backyard, healthy kids. It’s easy to take that for granted.”

He said the organization grew quickly after the first event.

“The smiles of the kids,” he said, about why it’s held annually. “They look nervous at first, then have the biggest smiles because they never thought they could do it.”

George and Judy Brodie also brought their 3-year-old daughter, Honor, to the event.

From Burke, they have a weekend home at Lake of the Woods and started coming to the adaptive events last year.

“Every time I see (Gavin) accomplish something, like every parent, it’s a heartfelt moment,” George Brodie said.

Gavin participates in Special Olympics as well and since starting with the adaptive water sports group has been able to stand on skis while supported by another skier.

“He definitely gets more and more confident,” George Brodie said.

But Brodie the joy of the event is manifold: He gets to see his son do something that many don’t get to because of a disability, and he gets to see his daughter building character by helping out.

Gavin’s friend Diego Milian, 18, was also there. His mother, Sally Milian of Annandale, brought him to the event.

“It’s honestly a little overwhelming,” she said. “All you hear in the beginning is how much they can’t do.”

But her son is active, playing basketball and keeping up with his younger brothers.

“I see how he approaches life,” she said. “He’s very social, and has so much positivity and joy.”

Ismael Hernandez brought his two daughters to the event, as well. Logan Hernandez, 9, has Down Syndrome.

“It’s awesome. Nine years ago almost to the day, she was having open heart surgery; from that to now she’s skiing,” he said.

The family moved to Lake of the Woods from Illinois in December. Hernandez said he was amazed to find such a supportive community.