

Inaugural fishing event for disabled children highlights benefits of outdoor recreation

It's not uncommon to see children fishing on a Sunday morning at the Harlem Meer. But this Sunday, the 18 children shrieking with joy at catching a fish for the first time are even rarer sight. They are the first participants of an inaugural fishing event for disabled children in New York State.

Hosted by the C.A.S.T for Kids Foundation, which has been organizing events for disabled children across the US since 1991, the event was planned by high school senior and Upper West Side resident, Max Marcus, 17.

"I always enjoyed fishing and volunteering and wanted to combine both of them," he said, "I saw this organisation C.A.S.T for Kids and that they've helped set up events and take special needs kids fishing for a day."

The foundation helped Marcus with the fundraising and sponsorship and his whole family also got involved in the event. The event was open to children, aged between 5 and 18, with all types of disabilities.

They were given t-shirts, hats and the fishing gear to use in the future. Many of the kids caught multiple fishes and at the end of the day, each child was given a special plaque by Marcus.

There are significant benefits for the children in engaging in physical activity but this can often be difficult, especially in cities. One of the main barriers is people not challenging the children because of their special needs, according to Travis Dorsch, an assistant professor at the Families in Sport Lab at Utah State University.



Mikayla, 7, caught the first fish of the day, a Bluegill. Photo credit: Noam Steinerman



For Owen, 13, fishing provides stimulation that would be difficult to get otherwise. Photo credit: Noam Steinerman

"What we found ... was an increased confidence in themselves," said Dorsch, who published an article for the Therapeutic Recreation Journal about the impact of outdoor recreation on children with disabilities. "Their self-esteem improved and that impacted their relationships with other members of their families."

Washington Heights resident Sandra Joy Stein attended the event with her son, 7, who has autoimmune encephalitis, a rare neurological disease where the autoimmune system attacks the brain. He is in a wheelchair and doesn't have the ability to speak. He can't travel anymore but always

wanted to fish with his grandpa, who lives in Michigan, so his grandfather was FaceTimed in to give his fisherman seal of approval.

Stein said, "We love having different experiences and we do everything we can...The only limits are the ones we imagine, so we don't imagine very many."

One of the reasons Raymond Ally and Francine Kleiss, who are members of the same support group, brought their sons from Queens, is because these activities can trigger speech. Their sons, Matthew and Zachary, both 14, have autism.

"We talk about the process, what happens with getting the fish out the water and putting it back in," Kleiss said.

C.A.S.T.'s Eastern Regional Director, Jeff Barnes, noted that getting children involved in the city can be especially difficult.

"This is unique as most of our events are out on big lakes or out of town," he said. "We're hoping people here will help grow this event."

Owen Atkins, 13, who has tried fishing before, caught more turtles than fish. "It's difficult to get as much stimulation for him as for other kids," said his mom, Kim, "As kids get older they start to do stuff more independently and he can't, so this was a unique experience."

[Published in 2016 after inaugural C.A.S.T. for Kids event at Harlem Meer in Central Park, New York]