

## Camp Little Rock strives for more in Medford

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By Sean Patrick Murphy

Tina Fiorentino is on a mission.

She wants to provide a free camp experience for blind and visually impaired youth for eight weeks. Currently **Camp Little Rock** hosts campers for six weeks.

The camp, named for her son Rocco, started 11 years ago at the YMCA and **Camp Ockanickon** in **Medford**.



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(L-R) Tina Fiorentino and Rocco Fiorentino are hoping other states join New Jersey in making October Blindness Awareness Month.

Rocco, 14, is blind. Tina started the camp because four separate camps turned Rocco down when he was younger because they considered him a liability.

She also started the camp because she knew there were probably more kids in the same situation.

In one week this summer there were 26 campers, all with varying degrees of visual impairment, and 45 volunteers.

Tina said a lot that happens at camp on many levels as teens act as buddies to kids with disabilities.

"What typically happens is these kids end up walking away with a lot more than" they

expected, forge friendships, and stay in touch with the kids throughout the year, she said.

Tina said they recently brought in a karate instructor and a snake and lizard expert.

"Kids who are visually impaired or blind don't get the opportunity to see what we see so we have to be able to physically put it in their hands," she said.

Tina said the benefits far outweigh the difficulties.

"Everybody has such a wonderful time that I don't find it to be challenging at all," she said, noting the friendships made and the happiness of the children is most rewarding.

"We work really hard to put all this together – our top priority is safety first – so we always want to make sure that our kids are safe," Tina said. "We're making a difference in the lives of the kids who participate."

She said Rocco is an activist who has been speaking before legislative bodies since he was 5 years old.

"As his mother I couldn't be more proud of him for the person he has become," Tina said, remarking on his compassion.

One of Rocco's goals is to make October Blindness Awareness Month in all 50 states. Currently 16 states have adopted that, New Jersey being the first.

The campaign, which was initiated in 2009, consists of contacting governors asking them to write a proclamation calling for the adoption of October as Blindness Awareness Month.

Tina said they also coordinate events with other groups that deal with the blind.

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"It's important because it allows us an opportunity to talk to people about the challenges that blind people face day to day," she said.

Rocco agreed.

"I just think that people aren't totally aware of the challenges that blind people face" and should be encouraged to help blind people who need help, he said.

"This camp is a one of a kind camp in south Jersey," Rocco noted, saying it is a way for visually impaired and blind to go fishing and boating and do other regular camp activities.

He said the activities can be empowering for some campers who do things like climb a rock wall for the first time and who leave with a sense of accomplishment.

Rocco said the most rewarding thing is knowing others are having fun and hopes to be a counselor next year.

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The Medford Sun | 108 Kings Highway East Haddonfield, NJ, 08033 | Phone: (856) 427-0933 | Email: [news@medfordsun.com](mailto:news@medfordsun.com)

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