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United Way-funded Camp Sunshine is a bright light for Toronto seniors

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Thu., Sept. 13, 2012 | 3 min. read



Summer camp isn't just for the young.


At Camp Sunshine on Ward's Island, it's also for the young at heart. And there's no other place like it in the city.

Every summer since 1970, seniors have boarded the ferry for the 15-minute ride to paradise. They come from nursing homes and retirement residences; some are isolated, disabled and disadvantaged, others active and independent.


Nestled in a wooded area a short walk from the water's edge, the Camp Sunshine centre, built by the former Metro Toronto, is better than a cottage getaway.

For many who attend the program, which runs from May to the end of September, it's their only chance to be surrounded by nature, meet new friends

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and depart from their daily routines. Last year, more than 1,600 “campers” participated in the day programs run by Sunshine Centres for Seniors, a grassroots, volunteer-based organization that reaches out to make a difference in seniors’ lives.

Many are from Toronto’s priority neighbourhoods, said executive director Jacquie Buncel, adding that camp helps “recharge their batteries and feel young again.”

For some, the staff and volunteers are the only family they have. “They really count on us and we help them every step of the way,” said Buncel.

Sunshine Centres for Seniors is among 200 agencies and programs supported by [United Way](#).

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Lilian Lee has been active in Sunshine for 25 years, 23 of them as a volunteer. The 90-year-old woman shows no signs of slowing down.

“I call this place a piece of Eden,” she said of the beautiful island refuge.

Although she has a large and close-knit family, Lee enjoys socializing with her peers. “This is a happy place to be. We get a chance to meet wonderful people and for me, it’s an opportunity to give back.”

When the summer camp ends, volunteer Helen Meszen, 77, is among the regulars at one of four Sunshine Centres’ fall and winter programs, including at St. Andrew’s United Church near Bloor and Yonge Sts., and St. James Town where local school kids are welcome visitors.

Meszen was thrilled when a centre opened in her Bleecker St. building five years ago. “Now retired people have a program,” she said. “For many years, people didn’t have anything to do. Now, we live together like a family.”

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Fall and winter activities include everything from day trips and multi-faith holiday celebrations to exercise and arts programs.

Gae Marco has been volunteering for 25 years, beginning after she retired as an overseas buyer for the T. Eaton Co. “Volunteering is very rewarding when you’re working for such a good organization,” said the spry senior who will soon turn 91.

The older she gets, Marco said, the better the volunteering. “I’m an old lady and so are the people I’m helping look after. If I’m having a bad day, they know what I’m talking about.

“But the best part of being a volunteer is working with a great group of people — it’s a lovely feeling.”

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For David Sykes and other employees from Imperial Oil/ExxonMobil, the reward was in seeing the smiles on the faces of the seniors. They volunteered at the camp as part of the company's annual Day of Caring, a longstanding tradition.

A computer software specialist, Sykes has volunteered at various agencies for the past eight years. "It's a great experience to help, meet new people and see the work agencies are doing first-hand. And we all know people who are directly or indirectly involved with United Way agencies. It's a way to make a difference."

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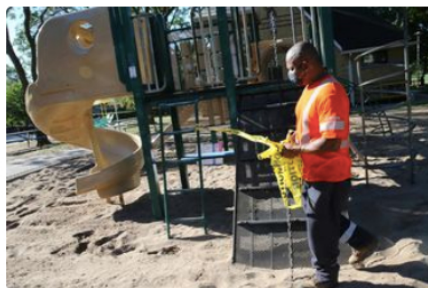
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