Individualization key to Frontier Day Camp

Director finds ways to connect with campers

By SALI McSHERRY

While 9-year-old Madeline Brown is melting chocolate in her fondue gadget, several girls are playing hide-and-seek, others are blowing bubbles, and some are officiating at the bake sale.

They’re all part of the Frontier Day Camp at Ursuline College, founded more than 36 years ago by Gary Polster, who is a professor at the college.

The camp for children with learning disabilities is different from traditional summer camps because it’s much more personal and individualized, with a 2-1 ratio, Dr. Polster said.

Maggie Carter, 21, who grew up in Chagrin Falls and now lives in Solon, knows all about that ratio and how important it is. She got her feet wet when she was in middle school, volunteering at the encouragement of her mother. That was nine years ago. She worked through the ranks as a junior and assistant counselor, to becoming a counselor and finally a staff member. Miss Carter is the camp’s director this summer.

She didn’t know anything about special education when she started. And she definitely didn’t know she would be studying to become a special education intervention specialist, let alone attend Ursuline College. But in getting to know the campers, like the little boy who had limited verbal skills, she found she was able to connect with him in ways other assistant counselors could not, and it made her feel she was in the right place.

When she returns home after a full day, she said she is exhausted, but it’s a good exhaustion, Miss Carter said.

One of the few summer camp programs in the Greater Cleveland area focusing on kids with learning disabilities, there is no emphasis on competition. Promoting cooperation, fun and skill development in a structured reassuring environment is the goal, Dr. Polster said.

The kids do all the typical camp things, from playing on the rock wall and the slide in the nearby forest, to going bowling, roller-skating, taking art classes, going on trail walks, visiting Lake Farm Park, campouts, cookouts and swimming, Miss Carter said.

In fact it was quite a sight, she and Dr. Polster said, last week when some of the kids were painting on easels overlooking the small lake. The camp utilizes some of the talent from the college, with a variety of specialists with backgrounds in art therapy and related fields, Dr. Polster said. Counselors have experience working with students who have learning disabilities and are enrolled in special education, psychology or related programs of study and have special insights and qualifications, he said.

The five-week day camp serves about 60 children at an affordable cost of $925 per camper, Dr. Polster said. And, there are campships available for those who cannot afford the cost, made possible through donations of individuals, he said.

The camp has evolved over the years, Dr. Polster said. There are tutoring, early drop-off and aftercare programs.

One of the great benefits of the camp is the friendships the children forge, such as three girls who like to play hide-and-seek enjoy hanging sleepovers at each other’s homes, Dr. Polster said.