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Surfers, autistic children paddle out together at Beach Bash in Belmar

JIM MCCONVILLE • STAFF WRITER • SEPTEMBER 13, 2009

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BELMAR — Something magical happens when you surf that first ocean wave.

Just ask 7-year-old Matthew Haran from Tinton Falls, who, along with roughly 175 other children, rode his first wave Sunday at the Fifth Annual Beach Bash in Belmar hosted by the Autism Family Services of New Jersey.

Despite a small case of parental jitters, even Matthew's mother had faith.

"I really thought once he got out there, he would really like it," said Matthew's mom Lisa Haran. "He's always saying that he wants to surf. I'm glad that he did it."

Beach Bash organizers say riding that ocean wave has a calming effect on most young surfers with autism.

Dr. Dorian "Doc" Paskowitz, 88, of Hawaii, a lifelong surfer who help found Surfers Healing, said there's something magical about standing on the crest of a wave.

"When you become partner to the wave, there is a kind of magic that overcomes you, if only for seconds," said Paskowitz. "But what happens in seconds remains as a memory in your tissues for a lifetime."

And while many autistic children may be a little reluctant to paddle out, Paskowitz said, it's a different story when they ride back in.

"They're forced in. The surfers grab them, put them on a board and paddle out," Paskowitz said. "But when they come in they're saying, 'More, more, more!'"

An estimated 5,000 people — including the young surfers, their family and supporters — stretched out between Belmar's Sixth and Eighth Avenue beaches, showed up early Sunday morning to support the fledgling surfers as they rode in to shore accompanied by a professional surfer from the San Clemente, Ca.-based Surfers Healing organization.

Attendees Sunday enjoyed ideal conditions with 80-degree temperatures, blue skies, a smattering of scattered clouds and a steady stream of vigorous waves.

Started at Sandy Hook in 2005, the Beach Bash surfing camp drew only an estimated 50 to 60 children the first year, said Jacqui Moskowitz, of Ocean Township, executive director of the Family Support Center of New Jersey, an affiliate of Autism Family Services.

"Now, it's turned into this humongous annual event," Moskowitz said.

This year's event is actually running over an extra half-day on Monday to make sure all the children who want to get to ride the waves.

Before starting, attendees yesterday joined on the beach to hold hands and offer a prayer.

The final message: "Go and ride a wave and have an awesome day."

For more information about the Autism Family Services of N.J., visit www.autismfamilyservicesnj.org, or call 877-AFS-4477.



Kalani Kahalioumi, a professional surfer from the big island of Hawaii, takes Michael McCrink, 12, of Brielle, on a ride, back to shore. (STAFF PHOTO: MARY FRANK)

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