

Getting special athletes in the water and on the slopes

By **MARY-JUSTINE LANYON**
Editor

There haven't been many advantages for special needs people on the mountain, especially in sports. That's what Debbie McAdam told members of the Mountain Sunrise Rotary Club.

"My son, Jeremy, hated snow and he was born here," she said. "I never thought I'd see him on the slopes."

Jack Cooperman, one of the forces behind the Rim of the World Special Athletes Foundation, kept encouraging McAdam to sign her son up for the adaptive sports program. Eventually, Jeremy went into the summer program.

"I watched him kayak, paddle a canoe," McAdam said. "It was monumental. I never thought he would do it."

She had been looking for opportunities for her son, who has Down syndrome. "Groups down the hill promised special events but they never happened," she said.

After watching her son participate in the Rim Special Athletes summer activities, "I was convinced he could do these things on the lake without my having a

heart attack."

And then, much to McAdam's surprise, Cooperman got Jeremy up on skis on the slopes at Snow Valley Mountain Resort. Tethered to Cooperman, Jeremy skied down the beginner slope.

Cooperman demonstrated how he conducts a beginning ski lesson by showing a short video to the Rotarians. In the video, special athlete Zack first is fitted for boots and then gets his skis. With first just one ski on, he walks in the snow, holding Cooperman's hand. He then adds the second ski. And then he is tethered to Cooperman and walks along a flat area at Snow Valley. "I'm flying," Zack exclaims.

Declared ready for the beginner slope, Zack rides up to the top on the people mover and then skis down, tethered to Cooperman, who walks behind him. The tips of Zack's skis are connected so he doesn't do the "splits."

In the background, Zack's brother, Patrick, can be heard encouraging him and laughing along with his brother. (Editor's note: The Rotarians found this film extremely inspirational. To watch it, visit <https://youtu.be/oeV7XOzEo2I>.)



Special athlete Jeremy loves the water but also learned to love the snow, thanks to Rim Special Athletes. (Photo courtesy of Rim Special Athletes)



President Michelle French (right) presented a speaker's mug to Debbie McAdam after she and Jack Cooperman talked about Rim Special Athletes and what it means to McAdam's son. (Photo by Mary-Justine Lanyon)

Cooperman explained that Rim Special Athletes has not been able to hold a fundraising event since the pandemic struck. "We have mainly been raising funds to pay Snow Valley for the use of the lifts and their instructors we've trained for special needs folks and vets, who ski for free. We fund the cost to Snow Valley."

But, more important than funding, Cooperman said, is getting the word out about the Foundation's services. "If you know an individual with a disability – either physical or cognitive – please let them know about our program," he said.

In addition to the water activities, they offer yoga and golf. The yoga, conducted by board member Kim Meares, has been taking place on Zoom. "We have people up and down the California coast into Oregon who are part of it," Cooperman said, adding they offer golf at Lake Arrowhead Country Club on Sunday evenings.

The water activities take place at a dock whose use is donated to Rim Special Athletes. Prior to COVID, Cooperman said, they would have about 30 participants a

day, one or two days a week. Because of limitations on gatherings, they have been offering the water sports to one family unit at a time.

Last year, Cooperman said in response to a question, Rim Special Athletes gave just over 70 individual ski lessons to people who were amputees, had cerebral palsy or spina bifida, were visually impaired or had cognitive issues.

Cooperman did more than get McAdam's son to participate in both summer and winter sports. He convinced her to join the Rim Special Athletes board.

"I am willing to go anywhere to raise money for this program," McAdam said. "We have a large community of special needs people up here. They have been hidden.

"You should see their faces when they go on the lake or on the slopes," she added. "This is the greatest organization I've seen up here for my child."

For more information on Rim of the World Special Athletes Foundation, visit rimspecialathletes.org.