

## HEALTH

# Y receives inclusionary grant for special needs programming

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For years, the Betty J. Pultum Family YMCA in Navarre has made it a priority to include special needs children in its summer camps and after-school programs.



Darden

The Y recently received a grant from the National Inclusion Project for the second consecutive year.

Co-founded in 2003 by entertainer Clay Aiken, the Project "serves to bridge the gap that exists between young people with disabilities and the world around them," according to its mission statement.

Dottie Thomas, branch director, said the YMCA has had a "great deal of success" in including special needs children into both its after-school and summer camp programs even before receiving the grant two years ago.

"It was a natural lead in for us," she said.

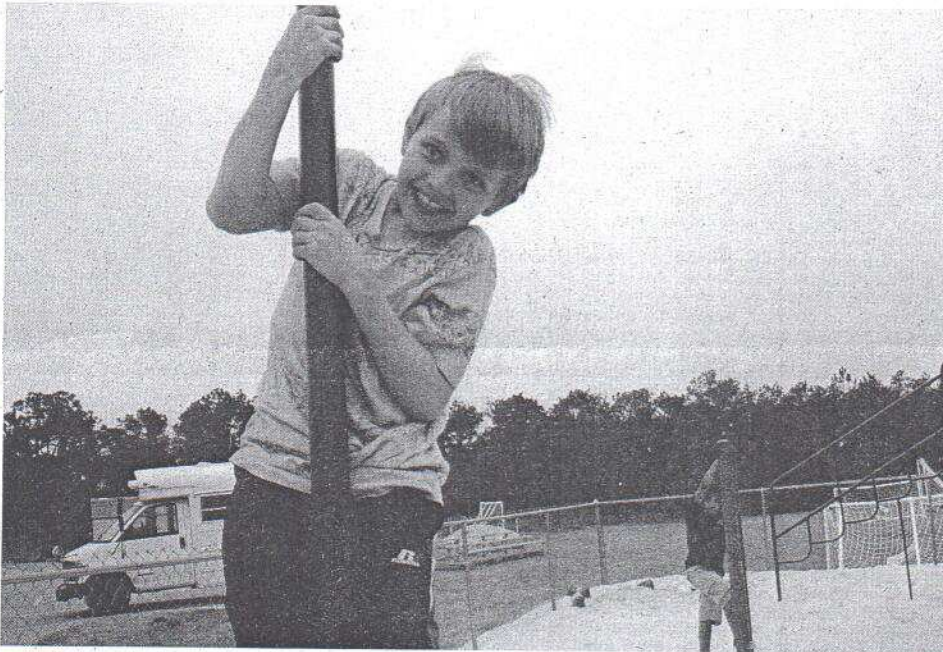
Three years ago, after Autism Pensacola awarded the Y a grant for inclusionary programming, the organization introduced the branch to the National Inclusion Project.

"We weren't aware of the National Inclusion Project," Thomas said. "We were already including the students."

Thomas said the grant funds staff training and equipment especially geared toward special needs children.

"It gives us the ability to scholarship more families with special needs," Thomas said.

She said the training is the most important benefit. Every year, the Y sends two staff members to the National Inclusion Project's North



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Navarre Press file photo

Carolina headquarters for training and the Project has sent representatives to the Y for training as well.

"They've taught our staff a lot... about skills that not only deal with special needs kids, but all kids," Thomas said. "They've given us a new perspective on dealing with children."

Thomas said the training is beneficial because some children have diagnosis that don't "fall hard and fast" under special needs, but must be treated with "extra care."

"It's been a huge help to all of us, and the kids," she said. "They've enjoyed being able to include kids with special needs."

The grant also pays for a special needs counselor for

***"We believe our partnership with the YMCA of Northwest Florida will get us one step closer to making the inclusion of children with disabilities the expectation and not the exception."***

***—Jerry Aiken, National Inclusion Project executive director***

the after-school program and the summer camp.

Thomas is thankful that Autism Pensacola made her aware of the Project.

"I truly believe we were given this opportunity through Autism Pensacola," she said. "We give them our gratitude."

As part of the partnership, the National Inclusion Project provides the "Let's ALL Play" program model, train-

ing expertise, annual Power of Play Conference and a wide network of inclusion experts ready to problem solve and share best practices on ensuring that no child sits on the sidelines.

The local YMCA is one of just 13 new organizations that the National Inclusion Project has chosen to partner with this year.

"We believe our partnership with the YMCA of

disabilities improve self-esteem, social skills and confidence, while those without disabilities improved their leadership, problem solving and empathy skills. The model makes it possible for all children to come together, and participate in recreational activities.

"This model teaches us how to incorporate kids with special needs into group activities," Jenny Darden, the Y's child care director, said in a release. "The focus is on helping them see how they can get involved and play with (typical) kids, which creates a tremendous learning opportunity for everyone. We're very excited to enter another year of partnership to fill this need in our community."

According to the release, research shows overwhelming evidence that the Project's "Let's ALL Play" model helps children with