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Pittsburgh Parent

**A SPECIAL camp
for SPECIAL kids**

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SPECIAL NEEDS GUIDE

The Woodlands - A special camp for special kids

By Ann K. Howley

Zoey Silinskas-Wood is a bright, red-haired girl with an infectious smile. The eleven-year-old from the North Hills loves music and a therapy dog named Chicken Noodle Soup.

Finding the right camp for Zoey presented a challenge for her mother, who, like any parent, wanted to find a camp that would interest and excite her child. But Cheryl Silinskas also needed to feel confident that the facility and staff were qualified to address the medical, social and other considerations that were critical to the health and safety of her daughter, who has special needs.



Zoey was born four months premature. For the first several years of her life, she needed a trachea tube to breathe and required in home nursing care. Although she is no longer considered medically fragile, she still copes with disabilities related to her premature birth.

"I was looking for a program that would give Zoey a chance to connect with others who had experienced similar medical challenges," says her mother.

Fortunately, they found The Woodlands.

"The place was amazing," Cheryl says, recalling the first Open House she attended. "It was so beautiful, peaceful, and calm."

She also felt relieved when she saw other children, teens and adults in wheelchairs, some with trachea tubes and connected to medical equipment. Her confidence grew when she met the nurses and well-trained staff, who knew the signs of respiratory distress and would be able to properly care for her daughter.

The Woodlands is a 52-acre facility in Wexford with year

round programs aimed at enriching the lives of children and adults with disability and chronic illness. Their programs, such as camps, retreats, clubs and events, are fully adaptive and designed to provide hands on experiences that reinforce social, cultural, environmental, recreational and spiritual growth. The grounds feature an indoor heated pool, 48-bed lodge, dining hall, creative arts and computer lab, activity center, camping area, sports court, nature trail, adapted zip line, amphitheater, adapted kitchen, adapted archery range and a par-3 adapted golf course.

Cheryl appreciates the commitment of the staff at The Woodlands. "It's amazing how they are able to get a resistant child to join in. The way they work with the kids makes it such a positive experience for them."

Zoey loves it there and this summer, she will attend Notes From the Heart music camp and Cub Club, a day camp for kids aged six to twelve.

The first time Zoey attended the music camp, Cheryl was concerned because her daughter had never spent the night away from home, so she was grateful when the staff told her she was welcome to pick up Zoey at the end of the day and bring her back in the morning.

To her mother's surprise, Zoey made her own decision. "I'm going to stay overnight," she announced.

"It's amazing to see her steps of independence since she's been a camper at The Woodlands," Cheryl says. "Zoey is happy when she comes home from camp. She's tired, too. But that's the sign of a great place, when your child is tired, but wakes up the next day, ready to go again." ■

Ann K. Howley is a Pittsburgh-based writer, teacher, speaker and author of a re-released memoir called *Confessions of a Do-Gooder Gone Bad*.



The Woodlands

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Living with disabilities



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