

For handicapped, county parks are fun

By Kathy Parrish
staff writer

Few handicapped children get to enjoy bowling tournaments and pajama parties.

But Oakland County is helping mentally and physically impaired kids share in the kind of fun other youngsters take for granted.

"We're making programs not only available to them, but accessible and affordable," explained Portia Fields-Anderson, Oakland County Parks and Recreation Commission's therapeutic recreation coordinator.

CONVINCED THAT recreation is therapeutic for everyone — especially residents with "special needs" — the Parks and Recreation Commission works with local communities to provide "adaptive" recreation. Programs and equipment are modified so that they can be enjoyed by handicapped players.

A major project was the All-Visitors Trail in Independence Oaks County Park, Clarkston. The hard surface loop trail makes the park accessible to those on crutches or in wheelchairs.

Fields-Anderson oversees a wide range of activities and special events for handicapped residents. Included are wheelchair ball teams, cross country

for blind skiers, a bowling team made up of players with cerebral palsy and dance classes.

THERE ARE even Easter Egg hunts and other activities where kids with physical and mental handicaps would usually just be onlookers.

"Many of our kids wouldn't be able to do these things otherwise," explained Fields-Anderson. "Some of our kids don't mainstream well. We have kids who just breathe."

Started in 1979, the therapeutic recreation program was a joint effort by several Oakland County parks and recreation departments. The countywide effort draws together people with similar needs.

"No one city could handle its own programs," explained Fields-Anderson, who was with Pontiac Parks and Recreation before joining the county.

"And there was a need for one person to coordinate and network the efforts."

A NATIVE Detroit, Fields-Anderson got her start in the recreation field early.

She conducted games in her backyard, was a basketball coach in ninth grade and played varsity basketball at Nativity of Our Lord High School.

Intending to be a social worker, the

honors graduate attended Wayne State University. But the shock of going from a small parochial school to the urban college resulted in her being on academic probation.

Taking recreation and dance classes to build up her grade point got her "hooked" on the field.

She earned a bachelor's degree in recreation and parks services and a master's in recreation administration and recreation leadership for the aging with an option in therapeutic recreation.

"RECREATION IS the one field that has all the elements I like," said Fields-Anderson, who still performs and teaches dance.

"I couldn't believe people get paid to do it."

A New Games referee, she developed her own concept of non-competitive play almost 20 years ago.

While teaching physical education in Detroit, she altered the game of Tag so that youngsters weren't "out" when tagged. Instead, she let them run or jump or touch their toes — and then come back into the game.

"That changed the focus of what we were doing," she said. "The goal wasn't to see who was best."

AS ASSISTANT director with Pontiac Parks and Recreation, she won points after hiring two city gang leaders to help out in centers.

"You take the bully and make him your assistant," she explained. "Making them feel important is the best way of drawing the best out of young people. Once they respect you, you can

start channeling them in positive directions."

A Pontiac resident, Fields-Anderson, 38, has been adding to the number of programs available to handicapped residents.

She also is working on the bigger goal of building up Oakland County's sensitivity to people with "special needs."

"To most people, barrier free means a ramp. But how can a quadriplegic turn a handle on a drinking fountain?" she asks community groups.

"There are so many little things to think about."



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