

Camp Invention expands young minds

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John Shaw stepped up to a small amplifier and picked up the microphone, calling first for everyone's attention.

That was no easy task in the Grandview Elementary lunchroom Friday, where 65 kids, four counselors and six teachers were eating lunch. The break in the action came during the last day of Camp Invention, a national program in its second year at Clarenceville Schools.

"Campers, you have two choices," Shaw boomed as the crowd quieted. "You can stay in here or you can go outside."

The line formed at the door



PHOTOS BY DONALD J. ALLEY

Space stuff: Daniel Mrljak, 9, of Livonia gets his spacesuit checked out by fellow "astronaut" Kelsey DeRidder, 9, of Northville, at Camp Invention.

almost as he was speaking and within moments the thunder of tennis shoes on concrete filled the room, a common sight as kids headed toward the playground. It was a perfect summer day, and a morning of inventing can be hard work.

"One day, they had to figure out a way to protect a water balloon, and it was dropped from as high as they could make it," Shaw said. He was sporting a white sailor's cap. "If theirs survived, they got to throw the balloon at the counselor."

For 10-year-old Joe Haapala, who will attend Clarenceville Middle School this fall, Friday's challenge was to protect an egg from breaking as it rolled down a ramp. Joe's invention consisted of four popsicle sticks and small wheels, with the egg nestled inside a series of cups.

But his favorite part of camp was taking up his computer and making something new out of it.

"That was real fun to take apart," Joe said. "I'm trying to make a boat out of it right now."

He admitted it really wasn't his idea to sign up for Camp Invention, which is part of a nationwide program sponsored by the National Inventors Hall of Fame in Akron, Ohio.

"My dad signed me up," he said. "Before, I didn't want to come, but I regret that now. I love this."

That's the whole idea behind Camp Invention - to open up a child's mind to something new and different.

"The cool thing about each one of these units is the way they can do it isn't one set way," Shaw said, pointing to a room full of supplies. "They can use whatever they want."

Alex D'Amore lives in Troy, but

that camp was held during a week he couldn't attend. Because his grandmother lives in the area, his parents signed him up for Clarenceville's program.

"Take apart is my favorite class," he said. "I took apart a VCR. I took out a motor and I'm inventing something with the parts."

Alex's idea is an alarm clock that tickles people to wake them up. It's specially designed for those who sleep so soundly, noises don't wake them up.

Does he know anybody like that?

"Yeah, me," Alex admitted. "My dad says it takes him twenty minutes to wake me up in the morning."

As the campers eat lunch, which is either pizza or something they've brought from home, the morning's conflicts occasionally need a little attention. Meghan Callahan, 17, is one of the camp counselors whose job it is to oversee the four groups, which are named for famous inventors - Edison, Wright, Volta and Bell.

A senior at Milford, she got into the program because her mother works with Shaw, who also oversees a camp in Walled Lake School District, where he teaches. "I really love working with kids," she said as she promised a

young girl she would address a conflict with another child after lunch. "It's really great to see them using their minds creatively."

It's also a great training ground; Callahan has wanted to be a teacher for as long as she can remember.

"This is a good way to get the chance to work with kids in the classroom setting," she said.

Her only real frustration, besides a few behavioral problems, is with kids who are a little shy.

"Some kids are kind of hesitant to open their minds," she said.

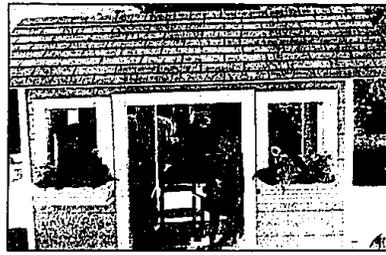
Although that can be frustrating, it also gives her a chance to help them do their best. "They usually surprise themselves."

Clarenceville's is one of 12 camps offered in Detroit. The National Inventors Hall of Fame started Camp Invention as an educational outreach program at two schools in 1990. In 1999, it became a joint project with the United States Patent and Trademark Office.

It has since expanded to more than 400 schools in 36 states nationwide, and last year, more than 27,000 children attended.

More information is available on the program's Web site, www.invent.org/camp_invention/

Mayfair raffle



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