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## Via teens soak up fun, experience

### Summer program prepares students with disabilities for life after school.

By Jacqueline Palochko, OF THE MORNING CALL

10:43 PM EDT, July 2, 2010

Josh Weirbeck moves toward the cat's cage. He cleans its litter box and then picks up the small, striped cat, holding its face close to his.

"Look how this kitty likes me," Josh, 18 of Bethlehem, says. "I like the small kittens the best."

He places the cat back in its cage and moves on to the next cage, which houses a small black feline.

"Oh, I want to take this one home," he says. "Don't you want to come home with me, kitty?"

Josh, along with Bryan Wigg, 18, and Christina Saraceno, 14, was spending Wednesday morning tending to 10 cats at the Cat Shack in PetSmart in Whitehall Township.

The teens are spending the summer volunteering, job shadowing and enjoying recreational activities as part of Via's Summer Teen Experience.

Thirty-two teens with physical, mental health and development disabilities are participating in the program, now in its third year.

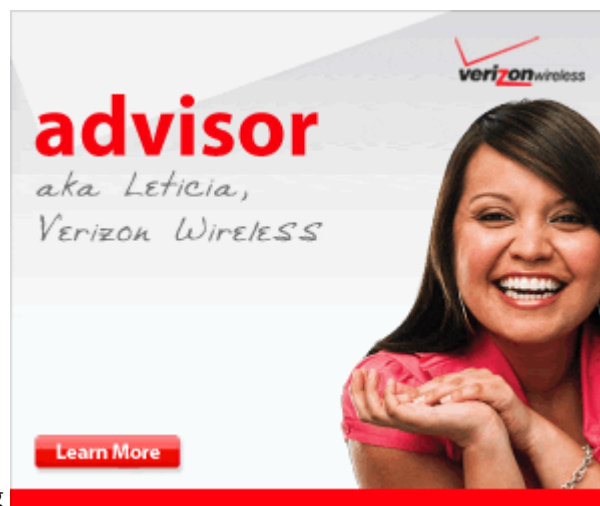
"Josh wants to take all the cats home," Carrie Kenny, the teens' counselor, says. "C'mon, guys, let's sweep the floor."

At the Cat Shack, the teens cleaned cages, played with the cats and provided fresh water. Later in the day, they visited a local nursing home.

"We're taking care of them [the cats] so they can have good homes," says Christina, who likes cats but is fonder of her dog Millie at home.

Via of the Lehigh Valley is a nonprofit agency that provides services for children and adults with disabilities such as autism, cerebral palsy and Down syndrome.

advertisement



The advertisement features a smiling woman with dark hair, wearing a pink top, with her hands clasped in front of her. The text "advisor" is written in large red letters, with "aka Leticia, VERIZON WIRELESS" written in a smaller, handwritten-style font below it. The Verizon Wireless logo is in the top right corner. A red button with the text "Learn More" is located at the bottom left of the image.

The Teen Summer Experience was created after area parents contacted Via asking for a fun summer program that would also prepare their children for life after school, said communications director Lisa Walkiewicz.

The program costs \$450 a week, or \$80 a day. Through the program, the teens volunteer at nursing homes and animal shelters, have mock interviews with human resources representatives, attend IronPigs games and take trips into Philadelphia.

Some of the students return year after year, like Bryan of Bath, who says he's made most of his friends through the program. Some are in their first year in the program, like Christina of Bethlehem Township, who says she's having so much fun, she wants to come back next year.

Besides the vocational experience, the teens and counselors bond in the summer months. Since spending at least three days a week with the teens since June 14, Kenny has formed relationships with them. Christina, a basketball and volleyball player, says Kenny, nicknamed 'Coach,' helped her score 18 points in a recent basketball game.

"I'm their coach," Kenny says as the three teens sweep the floor and say goodbye to the cats. "Good job, team."

Kenny, in her third year working for the teen summer experience, says she finds her job rewarding. During the summer, she watches quiet, reserved kids blossom and mature, taking on responsibilities.

"It's really great to see the kids after the program," she says. "And especially to see them applying the skills we taught them to life."

Walkiewicz says the program gives the teen a chance to take a step into adulthood.

"These are very talented teens and young adults who have a lot to contribute to our community," Walkiewicz says. "All they need is someone to believe in them."

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## VIA TEEN SUMMER EXPERIENCE

•**What:** Program offered by Via of the Lehigh Valley to help prepare physically and mentally disabled 14- to 21-years-old for life after school.

•**Where:** Offers job shadowing, volunteering opportunities, mock job interviews and recreational activities.

•**When:** June 14 to Aug. 27

•**Cost:** \$80 a day or \$450 a week

•**Information:** 484-893-5390

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Kevin Mingora, THE MORNING CALL / June 29, 2010  
Christina Saraceno, 14, of Bethlehem Township helps clean a cat kennel at PetSmart in Whitehall. She is participating in Via of the Lehigh Valley's Teen Summer Experience. The program helps prepares teens with developmental disabilities for life after school.



Kevin Mingora, THE MORNING CALL / June 29, 2010  
Bryan Wigg, 18, of Bath cleans a kennel housing Raina, a 1 year-old cat up for adoption at the Cat Shack at PetSmart in Whitehall. Bryan was there as part of Via of the Lehigh Valley's Summer Teen Experience program.



Xani relaxes in her kennel as Josh Weirback, 18, of Bethlehem clears the litter. Josh, a participant in Via's Teen Summer Experience, wants to take all the cats home, his counselor Carrie Kenny says. (Kevin Mingora, THE MORNING CALL / June 29, 2010)