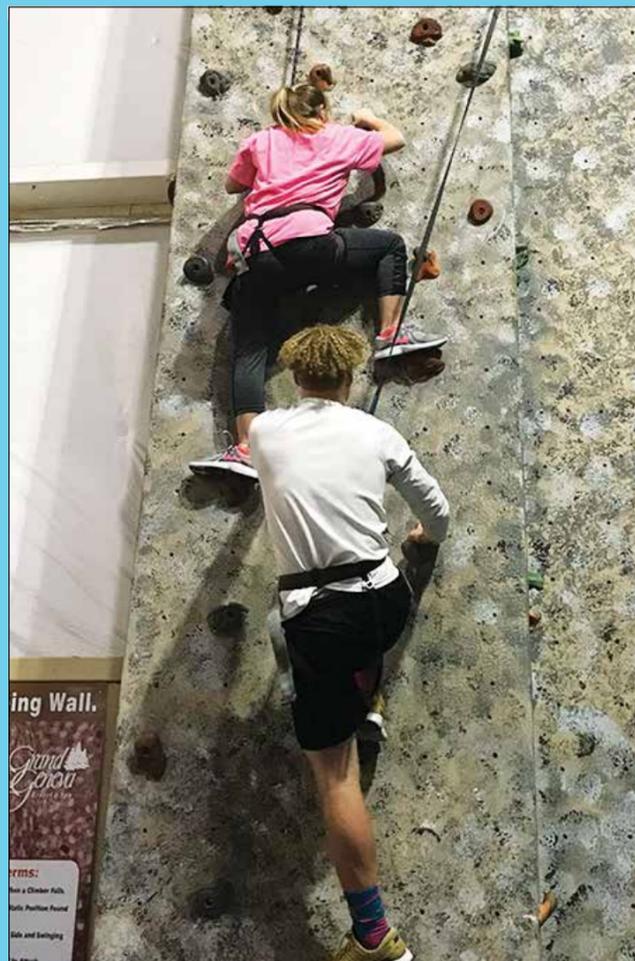


Fast friends

Program helps people with disabilities make social connections



At left: On a Rec Connect outing with the Social Voyagers club, Kelsea Woelky (second from left) and Wendy Harmon (second from right) pose with staff at a rock-climbing outing at Grand Geneva. Above: Woelky ascends the wall with a staff member following close behind.

SUBMITTED PHOTOS Southern Lakes Newspapers

A new recreation program strives to find fun and engaging opportunities throughout the greater community that people of all abilities can take part in.

by **Heather Ruenz**
STAFF WRITER

to maintain established relationships with peers and have access to meaningful activities within the community.

“Rec Connect is an opportunity created to meet the social needs of individuals and can serve as a catalyst to develop new friendships with people with similar interests throughout Walworth County,” Simonsen said.

Tara Scott, the recreation specialist overseeing Rec Connect, said the program has generated excitement and encouraged teamwork among several groups.

“It is heartwarming to see the community support and excitement for Rec Connect. It collaborates with existing organizations, programs and entities to expand available recreation and social opportunities for all individuals with a disability in Walworth County,” Scott said.

By fostering an environment that is engaging and meaningful for the participants, Rec Connect strives to broaden social support networks, she explained.

“And enrich the lives of

everyone involved, among many other goals,” Scott added.

Get involved

Rec Connect is open to anyone with a disability who lives in Walworth County. A registration form for each participant must be completed for each session and includes pertinent information such as the name of a parent/guardian, who is providing transportation and health history.

All fees are to be paid in full, though there is a payment plan option that, if approved, allows payment of half the fee upfront and the balance shortly after the session kicks off. Fees for single events generally range from \$5 to \$25, while weekly programs, which usually last six weeks, fall between \$25 and \$70 on average.

Most of the Rec Connect programs require participants to provide their own transportation, but VIP Services’ Shared Ride program is an option that can assist.

Participants are expected to abide by some basic rules.

“While we want everyone to

participate in our programs, it is our goal to provide a safe and enjoyable experience for all participants,” Scott said.

As a result, participants are asked to follow these guidelines while at a Rec Connect program:

- Use language that is not aggressive or offensive;
- Display behavior that is appropriate and not aggressive;
- Show respect to all equipment, supplies, facilities and other people;
- Follow the directions and instructions given by staff and volunteers;
- Stay with the group; be able to function in a ratio of one staff member/volunteer to six participants and;
- Need minimal assistance with daily living skills.

How you can help

There are numerous entities that support VIP Services’ Rec Connect, including Elkhorn and Walworth libraries, Hampton Inn, Yoga Hohm, Elkhorn Area School District, Lake Lawn Resort, Delavan Lanes, Geneva Theaters, Bayside Athletics,

Advia Credit Union, Town Bank, Williams Bay Park and Recreation.

Community members assisting in a variety of ways include Wes Courier of Lake Lawn Resort, Jon Anzalone of Elkhorn Area School District, Chad Robinson of Matheson Memorial Library and Kristine Branan of Geneva Theaters.

Rec Connect is continually seeking volunteers to become part of the team and help at the programs offered.

“We offer a variety of fun programs, and no experience is necessary. We will help you learn how to best work with the participants during the programs,” Scott said.

Anyone with a skill, talent, knowledge or program idea they would like to see offered through Rec Connect is welcome to contact Scott.

For more information about Rec Connect, to volunteer or share a program idea, or to register for events or the Valentine’s dance, contact Tara Scott at 262-723-4043 or tarascott@vipservices-inc.org.

The program, Rec Connect, welcomes participation by individuals with disabilities from throughout Walworth County. It’s housed under VIP Services and is in line with the organization’s longstanding support and commitment to people with disabilities, according to Cindy Simonsen, executive director of VIP.

“VIP Services has been committed to serving individuals with a variety of needs for nearly 50 years, and our commitment remains as strong as ever. Consistent with the national Employment First initiative and the State of Wisconsin’s guiding principles, VIP Services continues to align services to meet person-centered needs,” Simonsen said.

The program, which offers activities throughout the year and has fees that vary, is currently in the midst of its winter session.

There have been single offerings this winter, such as a couple crafting events at area libraries, a shopping trip to Southridge Mall in Greenfield, a winter pool party at the Hampton Inn in Elkhorn and a yoga clinic in Delavan.

Rec Connect also offers weekly programs, including currently: Sports of Sorts – the opportunity to learn a variety of sports such as basketball, volleyball, kickball, pickleball; Baker’s Delight – a chance to bake, and take, new recipes; Zumba – open to all ability levels; and, Strikers, non-competitive open bowling.

At last week’s Strikers program, held Mondays at Delavan Lanes, two participants shared their thoughts on Rec Connect.

Laura Feitshans said she has been working at VIP Services for about 25 years, and while she doesn’t get involved in too many programs, she has been bowling with Special Olympics a long time and enjoys bowling.

“I was happy this started,” Feitshans said about the Rec Connect bowling program.

Feitshans said she likes to attend the dances and enjoys dancing to the song “Achy Breaky Heart.”

Adam Lofy said he’s been part of the team at VIP a “long time,” and in addition to bowling, he plays basketball and did water aerobics.

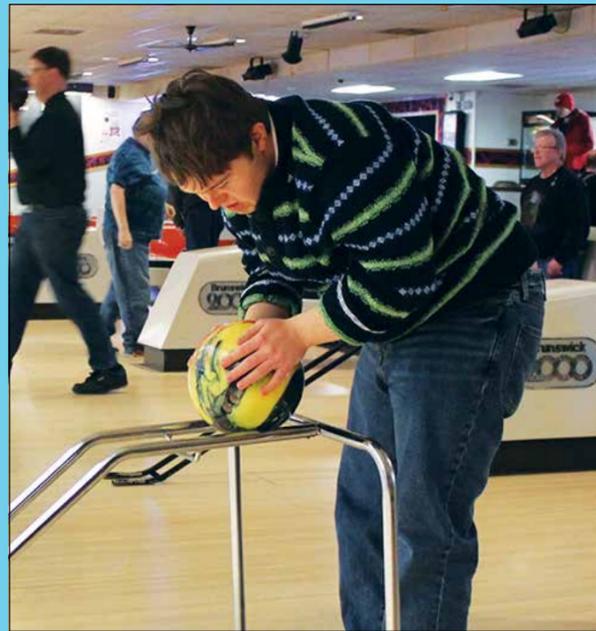
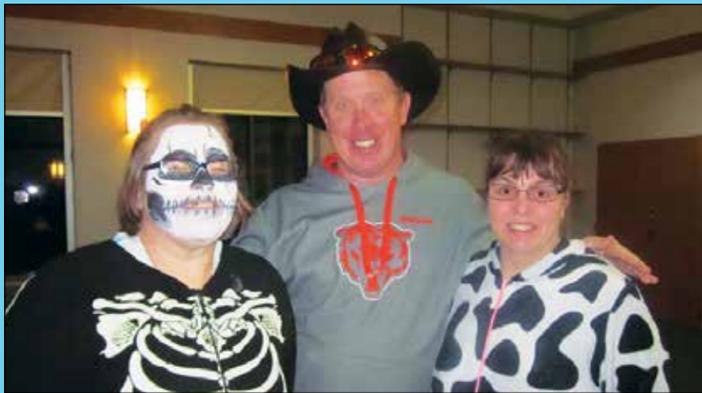
“I like it,” Lofy said of Rec Connect.

He said he also enjoys going to the dances and his favorite songs to dance to are those by Kool and the Gang and “Thriller” by Michael Jackson. Asked if he was a good dancer, Lofy had an immediate response.

“You bet I am,” he said with a smile.

Meaningful connections

Simonsen said as people with disabilities become employed and find other ways to fully participate in community life, VIP Services recognizes the need for individuals



Top (from the left): Cheering at Delavan Lanes in last week’s Rec Connect outing are Derek Weber, Adam Lofy, April Shafer, Laura Feitshans and Breanna Karsten; Cliff Katzman is in the background. Right: Colton Ripple carefully sets his bowling ball on a stand prior to releasing it down the lane. Above (from the left): Kelly Findlay, David Weber and Heather Helman are all dressed at the Halloween dance. A Valentine’s dance will be held 5 to 7 p.m. Saturday, Feb. 16, at Elkhorn Area Middle School. The fee is \$5 and it’s open to all people with disabilities in Walworth County.

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