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Photos by Anne Lang

Horseback riding is a typical activity for visually impaired people at Nameless Valley Ranch.

STRETCHING LIMITS

Visually impaired campers learn to expand capabilities

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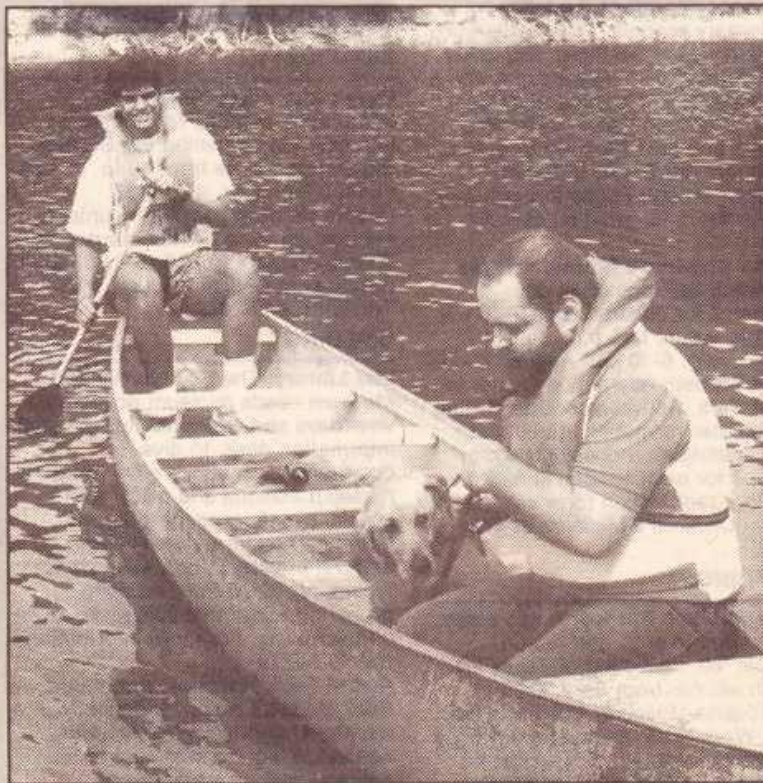
Each July, dozens of visually impaired children and adults have an opportunity to test the boundaries of their abilities at a week-long camp session at Nameless Valley Ranch near Jonestown.

"We bring campers here not only to have a good time, but to help them find that they can do a lot of things they never thought they could do," said camp coordinator Phil Busker, a representative of the Nebraska-based Christian Record Service, which sponsors the camp.

Daytime activities are similar to those offered at typical camps for sighted people, including swimming, canoeing, horseback riding, archery and water-skiing. Arts and crafts, nature study and Christian fellowship sessions are also part of the optional schedule.

While most summer camps are geared toward children, only about 15 of this year's 65 campers were under age 20. Half of the campers are considered legally blind, Busker said, while the rest are totally blind.

"We have a variety of people here, ranging in age from 9 to the early 70s," Busker



Camper Don Smith sets off in a canoe with his dog, Rudy, and counselor James Hall.

said. Campers come from all over Texas, and this summer there were 30 campers from Mexico.

This marked the seventh consecutive summer the CRS Camp for the Blind was held at Nameless Valley Ranch. The CRS sponsors 54 similar

camps in the United States and Canada. Business and individual donations result in free tuition for all campers.

Nameless Valley Ranch is owned by the Texas Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, which conducts its own camp

for most of the summer, then leases the facility to the CRS and other religious and civic groups during the remaining months. Campers sleep in comfortable, modern cabins. Cafeteria dining takes place in the large multi-purpose lodge on the ranch's highest hill.

Camper Ron Hubbard, 28, works as a disc jockey at a Jacksonville Christian radio station. Back for his third year at Nameless Valley, Hubbard said he enjoys taking part in the numerous camp activities.

"I love riding and swimming, although I'm really not a jock," he said. "Camp energizes me and gets me ready to get back at it at work."

Hubbard spoke while sitting under a tree with half a dozen campers. On the small ranch lake nearby, sighted counselors instructed blind passengers in canoes, while another camper under the tree strummed his guitar and sang.

Abilities such as the singer's are encouraged during the week and especially in the camp talent shows, held on two consecutive nights this year due to the number of participants. The time-tested tradition of singing around the campfire is also alive and well at the blind camp.

Remarking on the increased confidence level of campers who return (50 percent were returnees this summer), Busker said, "It's amazing how one week at camp can change them so much from the first time they came here. So many campers really open up and surprise themselves."

Houston resident Don Smith, 24, who attended with his guide

dog, Rudy, said camp "makes me feel independent." Smith also attends a CRS-sponsored winter camp, where he learned to snow ski.

Due to the level of assistance required at a camp for the blind, the camp's camper-to-counselor ratio is always at least four to one. This year it was one to one, because volunteer teen-agers from the Seventh-day Adventist camp stayed on to help after their session was over.

Before the blind campers arrive, all counselors and volunteers participate in a special orientation which includes spending a portion of the day blindfolded. The experience helps them understand the world from a blind camper's perspective and alerts them to potential hazards most sighted people wouldn't think of, such as tripping over a stone or tree root.

The paid counselors, who each specialize in a particular activity, are often college students considering a career working with the handicapped, Busker said. Most counselors work at the camp for the entire summer, as does the kitchen staff, a full-time nurse, maintenance crew and support staff. They are led by camp director Jeff Brown, who works closely with Busker during the blind camp session.

Busker said he'd like to see Nameless Valley Ranch filled to its capacity of 120 campers. Busker and other CRS representatives, who spend most of the year calling on businesses to solicit sponsorships, also visit schools, nursing homes and "anywhere else we can

think of" to reach prospective campers.

"We're a small force trying to do a big job," Busker said. "We know there are so many blind folks we haven't reached who would really benefit from a week of camp. On our visits, we see so many children and adults who just sit at home and do nothing, because they don't know their capabilities. When we get them here to camp, we challenge them to try it all."