

Volunteer-driven adaptive ski program gets kids on the snow

By Jill Oberly, Reno Gazette-Journal

Drive by Sky Tavern on a weekday afternoon and the hill is quiet, the parking lot empty.

But stop in on a Saturday or Sunday and the mountain is buzzing. A handful of chairlifts and even more trails are filled with some 2,500 kids learning how to ski under the watchful eyes of 350 volunteers.

Since 1948, the nonprofit has provided ski and snowboard instruction to children of the Truckee Meadows regardless of financial limitation. In 1995, it started giving snow sports instruction to those with cognitive and physical disabilities through the Sky Tavern Adaptive Program.

The adaptive program is unique because of the amount of time its participants get to spend on the snow. During the course of a season, students are on the hill eight weekend days, with two hours of instruction each day. Each week, a single child is paired with an instructor, and often that instructor is the same person. The frequency and consistency are keys to the program's success.

"A lot of the programs are, show up once and do it once, but this is really something that you can do as a part of your life, not just a one-day thing," said mom Emily Houston. "My son gets to go for eight weeks, every weekend. It is super affordable, and the guys that do it are so incredibly knowledgeable, talented and generous."

Houston's son Ben has cerebral palsy and is in his third year with the program.

In a typical season, both the adaptive and junior ski programs will start the second weekend in January. But this year, a lack of early season snow pushed the adaptive program start back to the weekend of Feb. 25, where it started at Mt. Rose-Ski Tahoe. Mother Nature finally cooperated, and the program operated at Sky Tavern the following weekend. This year's closing date is not firm. Organizers will wait to see how many kids stick around for spring break, April 7-15, before making the call.

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