

BIG TOWN **BIG HEART**

Playing catch



Frisbees turn kids' disabilities into 'disc'abilities

Brad Keller, the Frisbee director for Project HAPPY, plays a game with clients and volunteers.

BY HOLLY REICH
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Brad Keller, a world-class Frisbee freestyler, has run the Frisbee program at Project HAPPY for over three decades. He started working with the nonprofit at its inception, when he was just nineteen, and calls himself a “grandfather” of the initiative.

Project HAPPY (Hunter Activity Program for Parents and Youth) provides individual sports, team sports and recreational activities to New York children and young adults with disabilities. The initiative began at the department of health and physical education at Hunter College in 1981.

“The program was designed as an instructional physical education program for young people with disabilities and as a training ground for students who were entering fields of adapted physical

education, physical therapy and special education,” explains Penny Shaw, director of Project HAPPY.

Keller first heard about the program when he started taking dance classes at Hunter College in 1980. “I had been in a major car accident and damaged my face very badly,” he explains. At the time of the accident, the teenaged Keller had been competing around the country as a Frisbee freestyler and had to stop touring to recover. “I began studying with the famous Penny Shaw, a former principal dancer with the choreographer Erick Hawkins, to get my brain and body working again.”

It was serendipity when Keller stumbled over a box of Frisbees that Shaw was planning to use with clients at Project HAPPY. She invited Keller to bring his skills to the program. The rest is history.

Shaw, who spearheads the

free Saturday programs, says that, when it started, Project HAPPY had 10 volunteers who worked with 25 people with special needs. Project HAPPY, held at Hunter’s Brookdale campus, now works with 140 people who have disabilities. The program also has over 100 volunteers.

Project HAPPY’s space, which takes up an entire block in downtown Manhattan, houses a basketball court, a swimming pool, a weight training room, a game room with table tennis and air hockey, a stage for dance performances, a yoga room and an area specifically dedicated to Keller’s Frisbee sessions.

“I call it my ‘DiscAbilities’ work because everybody is able to be successful with a flying disc,” Keller says. “Because you use your fingertips instead of the palm of your hand to throw and to catch it, everyone can do it. It neutralizes a lot of those gaps, so that anyone of any ability level

can play.”

Keller, who is still actively competing in the world Frisbee arena, says the flying disc isn’t only something people fling through the air. For Keller, a Frisbee can act as a tool to explore different types of movement and as a tool for communication. “My goal is to help the kids experience self-esteem and expand their social interactions, feel successful and, of course, have fun!” he says.

One of Keller’s autistic students, C.H., came to Project HAPPY about four years ago. “He was a nonverbal, standoffish 11-year-old boy who barely communicated. He spent a lot of his time staring into space and was totally disconnected socially,” Keller explains. When a Frisbee was thrown to C.H., he caught it only when he noticed the disc flying towards him. It took Keller and his team a lot of work to keep C.H. connected,

but their hard work eventually paid off.

“Now he arrives at the Frisbee area smiling. He looks directly at me as he says, ‘Frisbee, Frisbee!’ and his smile grows,” Keller says.

Keller relies on C.H.’s participation, too. For example, C.H. plays catch with another participant, I.L. who has a varied set of physical limitations as a result of cerebral palsy. “I.L., a wheelchair user, has significant limitations in her ability to reach and throw, so her partner must be patient and accurate while also being gentle. Her range of movement has improved significantly as a result of C.H.’s help. C.H. has become one of the people that I count on to satisfy the sensitivities and demands of helping others in my ‘DiscAbilities’ work,” Keller notes.

For more information about Project HAPPY, visit www.project-happy.org.

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