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#### **Program gives special kids special day on the slopes**

Author: *JAMES CRAVEN; HERALD STAFF*

Article Text:

SOUTHINGTON - The slopes of Mt. Southington were thinly populated Friday, but that made the sounds of laughter, excitement and the occasional, "I did it," that much more noticeable.

Several dozen adults watched intently as youngsters aged 4 to 14 pulled on multicolored ski parkas, clicked into ski boots and stepped, sometimes tentatively, onto skis, often for the first time.

The 17 boys and girls, some who could not see the slopes, or hear the sound of the wind as they came down the hill, or even feel the snow beneath their skis had one thing in common - smiles that shone more brightly than the noon-day sun peaking over the mountain top.

Steve Balcanoff watched the scene, a wide smile spreading across his face.

"This is what it's all about," he said. "You can't help but watch these kids and not wish you could spend every day here."

Balcanoff is the coordinator for a program that partners Connecticut Children's Medical Center, **Skiers Unlimited** and Mt.

Southington with children whose disabilities might have kept them from experiencing the freedom of skiing.

Kevin LeRoy, 4, was born with a sensory processing disorder that keeps him from feeling sensations unless they are magnified. When simply standing, it's not uncommon for people with SPD to be unable to feel where their feet are placed.

"Unless you push, he might not be able to feel to be able to walk," said his mother, Jennifer. "That's what makes this so exciting. He really reacts to the feel of skiing."

For Kevin, outfitted in a bright green cap, and his friend, Sam Gottlieb, who is legally blind and sports a pair of dark glasses, the challenge of the mountain is welcome.

"I'm going to the top," said Sam, pointing vaguely to where he thought the mountain to be.

"And coming down, fast."

Kevin, a bit more tentative, is less interested in the top, but is ready for the adventure.

"I'm going to do it," he said.

As part of the program, each child will be partnered with at least one volunteer to assist them.

For some, like 12-year-old Kelvin Holda, it will mean teaming up with Steve Vonick, an engineer from Stratford who first worked with **Skiers Unlimited** 10 years ago and has been hooked ever since.

"Once you come out here with all these kids and see the smiles and hear the whoops of joy when they get to the bottom of the hill, you're hooked," Vonick said.

Kelvin, who can hear but cannot speak due to a still undiagnosed ailment that resembles cerebral palsy, communicates by using American Sign Language.

As a second-year **skier**, Kelvin works to help other children clip on their skis, a job his mother said he enjoys as much as the skiing.

The program, which depends on volunteers, brings a wideassortment of people to the slopes to help. Terressa Howard, of Meriden, is a student at the University of Hartford where she is studying to be a physical therapist.

"I love to snowboard, and this gives me a chance to come out and work with children that need my help," she said.

Today, Howard will be teamed up with 11-year-old Dana Jacobs, of West Hartford, who had a stroke when she was 7 years old.

Because of the extent of Dana's disability, she'll be joined by 16-year-old Dennis Tyburski of Bristol, Tamara Holda of Hebron, and Jeff Gilarde of Cobalt. A specially designed pair of skis with a walker attached allows Dana to stand, while Holda and Tyburski take up positions on either side. Howard leads the way and Gilarde, with the use of guide ropes attached to Dana's skis keeps her speed under control.

Dana's father, Ira, watches his daughter's progress down the slope and notes her smile as she approaches the base.

"She loves this," he said. "It's a well-run program and the people are great with the kids."

Jacobs said that his daughter doesn't talk much, but that he can always tell how much she loves the chance to ski by how quickly she falls asleep in the car afterward.

"It's exciting, but the real excitement for them is knowing that they can do something that other kids can do," he said, watching as his daughter prepared to board the chairlift. "That's the homerun in this."

Greg Osiecki of Avon couldn't agree more. His two boys, Matthew, 13, and Mike, 6, both were born with Down syndrome.

As his youngest made his way down the hill, his smile was infectious enough that several adults began to applaud and shout words of encouragement.

Tongue out, Mike didn't waste anytime heading back toward the chairlift, except for one moment to turn his head toward his father and utter a single word.

"Fun."

James Craven can be reached at [jcraven@newbritainherald.com](mailto:jcraven@newbritainherald.com) or by calling (860) 225-4601, ext. 231.

Caption:  
Rob Heyl

Above, Dana Jacobs, 11, from West Hartford gets help skiing from a team, from left, Tamra Holda from Hebron, Jeff Gilarde from Cobalt and Nick Tyburski, 14, from Bristol. Below, the head of the skiing program for the Childrens Medical Center, Steve Balcanoff, helps David Gordan, 14, from North Haven ski the hill.

Rob Heyl

Brian Pawlow from Bristol uses his body and skis to guide Nathaniel Picklesimer, 12, from Newington safely down the hill.

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