

Franklin Township Program Dishes Out Hope, Help, and Harmony

The Franklin Township Parks & Recreation Department along with Mike Ianella, an adaptive physical education teacher from Essex County have partnered together to create a new recreational program for individuals with special needs. I recently sat down with Sue van Aken, Superintendent of Recreation and co-coordinator of the Harmony Club program to talk about this great new program.

1. [So, what exactly is Harmony Club?](#)

Harmony Club is a program designed for Franklin Township residents, ages 6 – adult, with special needs. Once a month different age groups meet for 1½ - 2 hours at the Franklin Township Community/Senior Center to participate in a variety of adapted sports/leisure activities. The overall focus of this program is to promote socialization through participation in activities that are fun for all.



2. [How did the idea for Harmony Club first come about?](#)

We were actually approached by Mike Ianella, a physical education teacher who works to adapt recreation leisure activities to allow individuals with special needs to participate regardless of disability. Mike runs the program for several agencies.

3. [Franklin Township Recreation currently runs Adult Therapeutic Recreation as well as the Therapeutic Basketball Program. What was the motivation for doing another therapeutic program?](#)

We wanted to provide more programs to special needs individuals. November was the first meeting of the Harmony Club. We did it as a test run in an attempt to see how the community responded to the program. The program ended up being very successful, so we decided to continue it on a regular basis.

Harmony Club fills a gap in services. After seeing the success of the Therapeutic Basketball Program and getting requests from parents, we began to see the need for more year-round programs. There just needed to be more for these residents.

4. [Do you have many adults participating in the program?](#)

Oh, definitely, and they really have a great time. We have several adult group homes that regularly participate in Harmony Club as well as those that attend from our Adult Therapeutic Recreation Program. They range in age from 18 to 92. Yes, 92.

5. [Tell me about Somerset County's involvement with the program.](#)

Franklin Township recently became a member of the Somerset County Park Commission Therapeutic Recreation Program. They offer a host of activities for individuals age 4 to adult. As a participating municipality, we are united with Somerset County in their effort to promote a leisure lifestyle that improves social, physical, cognitive, and emotional functioning and enhances participants' abilities.

6. [What are some of the challenges associated with doing this program?](#)

Right now, the biggest challenge is getting the word out so that people have an opportunity to participate in this wonderful program.

7. [So, what future plans are in store for the Harmony Club?](#)

I eventually want to develop a Parent's Advisory Board. Their main role would be to advise the Recreation Department on what is needed in the Township for individuals with special needs and how the Department can go about accomplishing it.

8. [What's the most rewarding thing about doing this program?](#)

It's really cool actually. The Harmony Club is creating new friendships for participants and their families. Many of the school-aged children attend out of district schools, so they are traveling much of each day. This is a centralized location where they can come together and meet. Participants are getting to know each other. Friends and families are getting to know each other.

If you have any questions about participating in the Harmony Club Program, please call the Franklin Township Parks & Recreation Department at (732) 873-1991 or log onto http://www.franklintwpnj.org/dept_recreation1.html. For information about the Somerset County Park Commission Therapeutic Recreation Program call (908) 526-5650 or log onto www.somersetcountyparks.org.