

# Los Angeles Times *Daily Pilot*

Sections

News Sports TimesOC Opinion



## Miracles for Kids hosts Newport Beach paddleboard session



Children and parents listen to instructions on how to hold a paddle before heading out to Newport Dunes during Miracles for Kids' 10th annual Surf & Paddle Camp on Thursday at Newport Aquatic Center in Newport Beach. (Kevin Chang / Staff Photographer )

By MATT SZABO | STAFF WRITER

JULY 15, 2021 5:48 PM PT

Adriana Arroyo looked fondly at her daughter as she played in the water near the Newport Dunes on Thursday morning.

A day before her sixth birthday, Eliana got a special treat. She was one of about 30 participants in the 10<sup>th</sup> annual Miracles for Kids Surf & Paddle Summer Camp.

The surf part comes later, on Aug. 13 close to the Newport Beach Pier. Thursday was all about the paddleboard portion of the camp, which brings together children fighting life-threatening illnesses and their siblings for some fun in the sun.

Eliana and the other kids rowed from the Newport Aquatic Center to the Newport Dunes. There were different ways to get there, either by stand-up paddling, a two-person paddleboard or a three-hull outrigger.

Adriana is grateful a program like this exists for her daughter, who was diagnosed with leukemia in May 2018. She has been in remission since soon after diagnosis, but also had to deal with a bad bout of pneumonia as her immune system was weakened.

“We did almost lose her,” said Adriana Arroyo, who lives in Fullerton. “She’s been looking forward to this. You know, she’s been isolated for the longest time, even way before COVID. She’s always looking forward to everything. It seems like she’s not really scared. We’re the ones who are little more scared, of getting her exposed to everything.”



Davian Castrillon, 3, of Fullerton gets his life vest fastened by his father David as they participate in the camp. (Kevin Chang / Staff Photographer)

[Miracles for Kids](#), a nonprofit based in Irvine, has been running the camps for the last decade-plus for children ages 5 to 18. Camp founder Tom Swanecamp, a Miracles for Kids board member, said the surf camp started out as a partnership with Billabong.



“Billabong was offering auction items from some of their pro surfers, and I built a relationship with a few of their marketing people over there,” Swanecamp said. “We got talking about what we can do to take it to the next level.”

Miracles for Kids now partners with Oceanside-based Waves of Impact for the surf camp, as well as [Boardriders](#), which donates the boards and wetsuits.

Miracles for Kids chief executive Autumn Strier said the organization typically hosts up to four combined paddleboard and surf camps each summer.

This year that number is two, as it is building back up after having to cancel events last year due to the coronavirus pandemic.

“Our families were deeply impacted when we had to cancel outdoor programming and wellness activities last summer,” Strier said.

“We had to focus on keeping the families safe, and that included keeping them home and delivering food to their homes. It did not include the ability, in a large group, to get them out in the sunshine where they could just be a kid.”



Miracles for Kids board member Tom Swanecamp speaks to participants on Thursday at Newport Aquatic Center in Newport Beach. (Kevin Chang / Staff Photographer)

On Thursday, the kids were set to go back to Newport Aquatic Center for lunch, followed by an awards ceremony. In a typical year, that would include medals, but not this time.

“We just move and adjust,” Strier said. “Tom has been flexing and adjusting with this program for years, and our kids are so resilient. They just want to be out here and have fun.”

That is ultimately the name of the game, and the goal of the camp.

“The whole intent is to have water sports, get kids out of their homes, out of their hospital beds,” Swanecamp said. “Today isn’t about treatment, medication, pills, needles. It’s just a beach day.”

Kristofer Eklof of Tustin, 13, came to the camp with his younger brother Kristian. Kristofer said he wasn’t scared of paddling in the Newport harbor. The water is calm, unlike at the beach.

Of course, paddling is nothing when dealing with other challenges many of the kids at the camp face.

Kristofer was diagnosed with acute lymphoblastic leukemia three years ago and is currently undergoing chemotherapy at [Children’s Hospital of Orange County](#). Miracles for Kids helps his family through bill pay and basic needs programs.



Children and parents stretch as they warm up before paddling out to Newport Dunes on Thursday. (Kevin Chang / Staff Photographer)

Others also support in different ways. Eight members of the Mater Dei High School boys' lacrosse team were on hand Thursday to aid the youngsters. Strier said the Mater Dei community has always been supportive of Miracles for Kids.

"It's super-cool," said Dylan Lin, a Mater Dei incoming senior and Newport Beach resident. "This just gives the kids a chance to go in the water, hang out, have a good time."

Having family members present at the camps is a big part of the Miracles for Kids mission, Strier said.

"Stability of the entire family is the goal of Miracles for Kids," she said.

"It includes bringing Mom, Dad, brothers, sisters, cousins — anyone who wants to come out. We want to make sure that everybody has mental wellness, because it impacts the patient. If everybody is more calm and stable at home, the patient does better."