

Event opens eyes about disabled

Rehabilitation center fights stereotypes

By Steven Kosoy
STAFF WRITER

POMONA — Wowed by the wheelchair basketball and hockey and challenged by rock climbing lessons, visitors to the Casa Colina Centers for Rehabilitation Saturday gained a new appreciation for those with disabilities.

"It's opened my eyes," said Louie Cruz, 15, of Anaheim. "They can do the same things I can."

Cruz came with his hockey team to the centers' 60th anniversary open house, and was intrigued by the men who played soccer and basketball in their wheelchairs.

Cruz' eye-opening experience was exactly what organizers hoped guests would take away from the event, which featured hospital tours, rock-climbing lessons, wheelchair sports, scuba diving and kayaking demonstrations.



EDWARD ZABALA, 6, gets some back-up from Casa Colina's director of wheelchair sports, Andy Houghton, right, during a field hockey game at the center's open house.

Nearly 1,500 people came to the hospital to watch and take part in the activities and enjoy the food. But more important

than just a day of fun, organizers hoped guests would learn how to interact with people with disabilities.

"People sometimes act like I came from another planet or something," said Melanee Fishwick, a psychologist at Casa

Colina. Fishwick became a quadriplegic in 1969 when she was injured in a trampoline accident.

Often people stammer with their words, or just don't know what to say or how to act around her, she said. But she wants people to know, "I'm just like you."

However, the more the general public interacts with people with disabilities, the more comfortable they'll feel, she said.

Thomas Chang, who lost movement in his legs and arms after a rock climbing accident five years ago, was more than happy to serve as an example to the public.

Therapists at Casa Colina taught Chang, 31, of West Covina, that he could still be a productive person, he said. Chang works as a computer systems analyst at the South Coast Air Quality Management District, he said.

"It's really important for people in wheelchairs to get out there and create a positive image," Chang said.

"When people see me, doing things, they realize being disabled is normal. We're just like everyone else," Chang said.

Staff photo by MIKE MULLEN