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Camp spreading the cheer to special needs students

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By **Melissa Fletcher Stoeltje** - Express-News [RSS](#) | [EMAIL](#) | [PRINT](#) | [SAVE](#)

HELOTES — It's a drizzly Sunday afternoon just outside of this tiny Hill Country town, but spirits inside the Pinnacle Cheer facility haven't been dampened by the wet weather.

"All right! Hands by your sides!" commanded instructor Jericho Jamon to his squad of cheerleaders standing at attention inside the cavernous gym. "Five, six, seven, eight and clap!"

The 12 girls, all dressed in matching red T-shirts and sporting ponytails, followed Jamon as he led them through a three-minute routine. Then again. And again. Finally, he was satisfied.

"Do you want to do it to music now?" he asked.

"Yeah!" the girls screamed in unison, ready to show off their prowess.

This wasn't your typical cheerleading squad going through the motions. The girls who belong to the Kinetic Kids cheerleading squad all have special needs, ranging from Down syndrome to autism to cerebral palsy. They take part in the eight-week class to be able to jump, clap and soar — opportunities not afforded them elsewhere.

Kinetic Kids co-founder and executive director Tracey Fontenot started the program — the only one of its kind in San Antonio — last August as a way to give special needs kids the benefits that come from team sport and competition.

"This is as much about the joy of socializing and friendship as it is about exercising, learning routines and being part of a team," said Fontenot, a physical therapist who started Kinetic Kids with Kacey Wernli in 2001. The nonprofit offers more than 70 sports and recreational programs to special needs children.

Fontenot explained that the cheerleading program is geared to higher-functioning girls who can follow instructions and perform the cheers with limited one-on-one assistance. The beats are slowed down and the stunts aren't quite as challenging as you would see in an average cheerleading squad, she said.

Jamon said more staff is on hand to help out, including student helpers — mostly cheerleaders at San Antonio schools who volunteer to work with the Kinetic Kids.

"They're such hard workers and such an inspiration," said Kat Finta, 17, a cheerleader at Reagan High School who helps out on Sundays. She first worked with special needs kids at a Kinetic Kids gymnastic class and got hooked. "It's wonderful to spend time with them. They're really good at listening and they try really, really hard."

A waiting list exists for volunteers who want to take part in the program, Jamon said.

Ask the girls what they like about cheerleading and they can barely contain their glee.

"I like jumping on the trampoline," exclaimed Isabella Cerna, 12, who has Down syndrome.

"I like to feel like I can fly," added Samantha Gorzell, 6, who has cerebral palsy and wears a leg brace.

"The music helps me move," explained Chelsea Figueroa, 13, who also has Down syndrome.

As the girls practiced their routine, parents, siblings and grandparents looked on from the sidelines.



Jennifer Whitney/jwhitney@express-news.net

Chelsea Figueroa (left) and Jillian Benitez prepare to lift Taylin Pena, 7, as they run through stunts with the Kinetic Kids cheerleading squad at Pinnacle Cheer in Helotes on Nov. 8.

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Cassie Brown, who drives her daughter Hailey, 9, about 45 miles from Devine for the cheerleading class, said the squad provides something her child can't find at her home school.

"It's a (small) school, and I want her to be able to meet kids like herself," she said of Hailey, who has cerebral palsy. "I want her to realize she's not so different. In Devine, she's sort of the odd man out. Here she's just part of the crowd. And the cheerleading really helps with her agility. It helps build her self-confidence."

Decel Morkovski said her daughter Olivia, 13, who has autism and mental retardation, gets to do "things that normal kids get to do in the (cheerleading) class. She's just learned so much, so many skills. And her personality has changed. She's blossomed."

Lexie Reiningner's mom said the 9-year-old with Down syndrome has learned skills in cheerleading that have transferred to the classroom.

"It trains her to listen, to follow directions," Theresa Reiningner said. "It challenges her to focus."

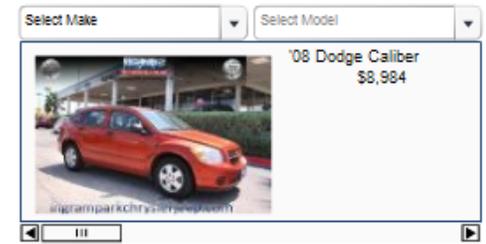
Fontenot said she was approached by staff at Pinnacle Cheer to start the special needs cheerleading class after one of its instructors saw such a class from a different city take part in a cheerleading competition. The local class will also take part in competitions in January and February, going up against other special needs cheerleaders from different cities and states.

The class costs \$65; Pinnacle Cheer offers its services and facility for free.

Soon, the girls will get spiffy new black-and-blue uniforms.

After they finished practicing their routine, they performed stunts, lifting each other up high in the air. It indeed looked like flying. Then they put their hands together in a circle to perform a break.

"Powder puff!" they exclaimed in unison.



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mitzie871 12:22 PM

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This is not a "one of its kind" there is a school here in San Antonio, where kids with special needs participate in Athletics and Cheerleading. It is great that Fontenot is reaching out to children who learn differently.

stxmum 11:59 AM

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My dear friend's daughter was born with Down's Syndrome. They live in the Dallas area and Devon has participated in cheer, dance, gymnastics, bowling, and a myriad of other sports and activities that are all geared toward special needs kids. Devon is now 18 and still is quite active with her groups. They get to experience everything their school peers do and their peers gain acceptance and see that the special needs kids aren't so different after all!

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