

CATHOLIC CHARITIES JACKSONVILLE

CHRONICLES

SPRING 2025



Sofia, Camp I Am Special camper



Camp I Am Special provides camp experiences to children, teens, and adults with Intellectual and Developmental Differences. We empowered 176 campers last year.

Camp I Am Special Impacts Campers, Families and Buddies Alike

Natalie Lupoli, mother of three, first heard about Camp I Am Special through her local mom's group, St. Anne's Circle. Her daughter, Sofia, was nonverbal, diagnosed with severe autism and had Intellectual and Developmental Differences that made overnight camp a concern. After receiving reassurance from a trusted friend on staff, Natalie took six-year-old Sofia to Camp I Am Special's summer session in 2014 – and they've both loved it ever since. One of Natalie's favorite things about camp is the perfect balance of safety and freedom it allows Sofia.

"The buddies and camp leaders follow her wherever she goes, letting her lead the way," Natalie said.

Yet it wasn't just Sofia that benefited; for the first time, Natalie and her husband received a full week of respite. This allowed them to enjoy quality time with Sofia's siblings, Michael and Gemma, at places less feasible for Sofia, such as Marineland and Ichetucknee Springs.

"I've spent Sofia's whole life on-call, but when she's at camp, I never have to worry," Natalie said.

Sofia's joy and the gift of respite led the entire family to give back. Natalie started bringing Michael and Gemma along to help with camp meals, lawncare, and decorating. As the two grew older, they became volunteers – called buddies – for other campers, forging strong connections with their peers while gaining perspective that every family has its own unique gifts and challenges. It's been 10 years since the Lupoli family first drove Sofia to camp, and now she gets visibly excited as they begin the route there. It's a feeling the whole family shares.

If you'd like to help more families have access to camp, please consider becoming a Camp I Am Special sponsor or making a donation by contacting Isaiah Maass at 904.230.7447 or CampIAmSpecial@CCBJax.org.