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Continuing fun

New Jewish Community Center offers opportunities to all

By Kathryn Jones
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The I.J. and Jeanne Wagner Jewish Community Center is not your run-of-the-mill summer fun spot.

Sure, it has the typical fare: two swimming pools and multiple physical fitness facilities. But Jerrad Strand, youth director for the Salt Lake City center, says the JCC has so much more and is open to all interested in learning and having fun.

For starters, children can dance, work on arts and crafts, swim four days a week and venture out on weekly field trips. There's also ample opportunity for outdoor adventures - anything from a hike in the Wasatch Mountains to a trek to nearby parks and gardens, Strand says.

Some are attracted to the center's cooking classes. Swimming, water sports and fly-fishing also are part of the lineup. So is the center's café, which is open to everyone. And about 200 children attend summer classes in the Early Childhood Center, an accredited preschool for children ages 2 to 5.

For children ages 6 to 16, camp is a huge draw. Toddlers in the Early Childhood program can experience a similar camp.



Below, a teepee serves as a place for children to rest in the shade. (Kathryn Jones/Close-Up Correspondent)



Parker, front, and Cameron climb the rock wall at the Jewish Community Center. (Kathryn Jones/Close-Up Correspondent)

"We have groups for everybody that we call a den," says Strand, who adds the 20-foot teepees are an amazing addition to the camp experience.

Located on two of the JCC's four tennis courts, the teepees shelter the children from the sun and provide a place for them to plot out future activities.

One favorite is *ga-ga*, a popular Jewish game similar to dodge ball.

"I had parents calling me when we were moving up here, and the first thing they asked was, 'Are you going to have a *ga-ga* court?'" Strand recalls.

Though the new center is in its first year, the JCC itself has been in business for more than three decades. Strand says the new facility, which formerly housed the Fort Douglas Country Club, has gone through an "amazing transition" and has a great atmosphere.

"It's fun to walk around and see kids singing and laughing . . . in the morning," he says. "We had so many kids and were not quite sure what our space was going to be like. But it's gone over famously."

"It's a great place," agrees Rebecca, a longtime JCC member. "The [center] has everything, and believe me, what [they] have here you can't take the place of: warmth, hospitality, caring." Patrons also are high on the indoor rock wall, as well as the outdoor swimming pool.

"We're kind of in that mix as a community center," says Daniel Burg, the center's membership and marketing director. "We've come to accommodate families and the fitness community . . . So that's kind of a balancing act for us."

For instance, the children's swim team at the center currently numbers 134 members and is ranked third in competition.

"We're getting those kids who want to do it and are so passionate about it," says Shannon Hollinger, JCC aquatics director. "They're young; they're willing to try anything. And if we get them [now], when they're older they can work" here.

Strand, for example, was only 6 when he started coming to the center. Years later, he finds himself spending his summer as a camp director. He prides himself on the camper-to-counselor ratio, which is 5-to-1.

"I have parents ask me, 'How come you don't put our kids in bright yellow or orange T-shirts when they go on field trips?' My response is always, 'If my counselors aren't playing with your kids and paying attention, then they're in trouble with me. I put my counselors in the bright T-shirts because I want the kids to be able to find them if they are in trouble.'"

Though the swimming pool is the top draw, the JCC's preschool and camp also are big hits during the summer. Carla Pardini, center director of child, youth and family, says 2- to 5-year-olds spend time at camp swimming, on field trips and enjoying recess.

"We were doing more field trips, but we cut back on those a little bit because with these little guys, they're exhausted."

The JCC's Fish Camp gives budding young anglers an education and hands-on experience on the river.

And then there's the pool.

"The pool is a great draw, and the exercise classes are really good," says member Beth Weekley. "It's a fantastic place, and obviously, the kids love it."

As a new member, Suzanne Kramer enjoys treading the treadmills and lifting weights.

"I love it here," she says.

Just as JCC founder Izzie Wagner wished, the center is open to everyone.

"Izzie's vision of life was to have a place where everyone was welcome," Burg says. "So we give back to every refugee family in Salt Lake [by giving] them a free one-year membership just for the asking."

The JCC helps hospital patient and transplant families with free memberships during their stay. It also provides free memberships to 40 nonprofit groups, which then auction them off to raise funds.

"Everyone is welcome regardless of who [they] are," says JCC Executive Director Andrea Alcabes. "We treat people the way people should be treated."

For more information

The I.J. and Jeanne Wagner Jewish Community Center, 2 N. Medical Drive, Salt Lake City, is open Monday through Thursday from 5 a.m. to 10 p.m.; Fridays, 5 a.m. to 7 p.m.; Saturdays, 8 a.m. to 7 p.m. For more information, call 801-581-0098 or consult the Web at: <http://www.sljcc.org>.