

Rafting for the blind



An ETC blind group heads through a rapid on the Stanislaus River, on what for them seemed like a "rollercoaster" ride.

It's a fun ride for the sightless

By BRIAN CLARK
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CAMP NINE — As the seven-person paddle raft slipped into the top shoot of the Stanislaus River's Widemaker Rapid, 22-year-old Debee Norling gasped with anticipation.

She cocked her head to the side to better bear hearing water breaking over the boulders.

And as boatman Rick Spittler called out "right turn!" she dug her paddle into the foamy water at her side.

She shivered as the cold spray splashed over the side of the boat and shook from her forehead the blonds whose hair the morning breeze had loosened from her braids. And as the raft eased into an eddy at the bottom of the run, Debee, who has been blind since birth, closed her face to the sun and smiled.

Her disability did little to dampen her enthusiasm for the river or the excitement of crashing through three-foot waves.

"It's great," she said. "I guess hearing and feeling the river is much more intense for me," continued the University of California, Berkeley literature student.

"I know it sounds kind of strange, but I am not distracted by all the visual stuff," she said.

"People tell me the canyon is very beautiful, but I really don't know what it is like because I can't see it," she explained.

"But I do know it feels like a roller coaster that is very wet and very fun and I would recommend it to all, especially handicapped people because it helps us overcome ourselves."

For Sally Manure, a legally blind 33-year-old Berkeley resident, riding the waves without the benefit of sight "is like nothing I've ever done before. It is wonderful to work with a group of people like this in the outdoors."

"Except sometimes we do hit rocks and you get knocked into the boat," she said, "but that can be fun, too. It is all part of the experience."

The women made up a four-person blind group trip, organized and run by Environmental Traveling Companions out of Angels Camp.

Founded in 1971 by Marc Dubois and two other river guides, "the program is aimed at people who normally don't get the chance to experience the wilderness and that may be because they are physically, emotionally or financially limited," said director Graciele Rossi.

Participants pay only what they can afford, she said, with the remainder of the costs made up through grants of equipment, money and time.

"We are basically a volunteer organization," she said "but that is how we are able to reach the blind, the deaf, the handicapped, inner city kids or juvenile delinquents. These are the kind of people who are often poor."

Co-director Spittler, who has been with ETC for six years, also takes groups backpacking and hiking in the summer as well as cross-country skiing in the winter.



Rick Spittler's feet lead the way.

"The wilderness and rivers are a real good teacher for the disabled," he said, "for it allows them to do things they could not do in an urban setting."

Here, they can jump off cliffs, swing on ropes, ride through rapids and learn that they can do without halts, roofs and other seemingly necessary things.

"It is incredible what this sort of thing can do for individuals," he said.

"But the river doesn't know who anyone is," he said, "and it can flip a raft with blind people or paraplegics just like anyone else. So that simply means we have to have a little more training."

In one instance, Rossi said, a young blind woman dismissed her aid when she returned home to San Francisco because she realized she could exist on her own.

Rossi is concerned the organization may lose its base on the Stanislaus if the canyon behind the New Melones Dam is filled.

"This place is unique. We do the Stanislaus for a reason and that is because it is more isolated than any other California river that is at this level of skill."

"We are certainly not just a bunch of elitist rafters only out for our commercial interests," she said. "The loss of this canyon would be a loss for the disabled."



Letting go, Debee Norling goes "kerplunk!"



Boatman Rick Spittler helps Debee Norling.



Debee Norling, left, Dan Smith help get lunch.

Bee photos
by
Al Golub



A playful water fight breaks out on ride down the river.

Will Lopex gets dunking.