Through a three-way partnership between the Cleveland Rotary Club, the Achievement Centers for Children (known then as the Society for Crippled Children), and the Cleveland Metroparks, 52 acres of land was purchased in Strongsville, Ohio in 1947. Their founders’ vision, according to minutes from an April 21, 1945 planning meeting was, “to be concerned with providing a health vacation program for children.” Camp Cheerful welcomed children with disabilities in 1947 providing Ohio’s first barrier-free residential camp.

What was life like for individuals with disabilities in the 1940s and 1950s when Camp Cheerful began?

Many children with disabilities were institutionalized or home bound, so Camp Cheerful provided a “vacation from their disability” as one camper expressed. It wasn’t until July, 1990 that the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA.gov) passed as a federal civil rights law that prohibits discrimination against people with disabilities in everyday activities. This was a turning point in the quality of life for individuals with disabilities as well as those without disabilities through their inclusion!

Many children living with the effects of polio enjoyed Camp Cheerful. Polio, an infectious, disabling disease was sweeping across the country causing paralysis at an alarming rate. Vaccines were not developed until 1955 and an oral vaccine became available in 1963.

Through the years, Camp Cheerful grew and changed to meet the needs of the evolving disability landscape. The Great Hall, cabins, a pool and bathhouse were built for the growing number of campers and programs. The newest addition in 2015 was the Camp Cheerful Clubhouse built to accommodate the River Rock Adult Day Program, focusing on enhancing the quality of life for adults with disabilities through engaging social, recreational, and educational activities year-round.

We are grateful to our visionary leaders, our generous supporters, public funders, our partnership with the Cleveland Metroparks, and dedicated staff and volunteers that have made Camp Cheerful all it is today. We look forward to all the happiness Camp Cheerful will bring to children and adults with disabilities and their families in the years to come!
Amenia was shocked when she heard her 4-year-old son, Jaylen, say “walk on” at his weekly Therapeutic Horsemanship lesson at Camp Cheerful last October. These were his very first words. Amenia excitedly recalled how her son took to riding our gentle horse, Nick, and began excelling in following directions. “Something woke up in him,” she said. After his lesson, he is so excited and happy. Since his first words, he has continued to add words to his vocabulary and has learned how to mimic speaking phrases. He now will say “I love you” repeating after his mother. His new found speaking ability is carrying over to his home and school. What progress!

Beyond his speech, Jaylen has improved his core muscle tone and posture. When he first started taking riding lessons, he had difficulty sitting straight and his side walker had to help him stay centered on his saddle. His mother now reports he proudly sits straight up independently.

Change in routine is often difficult for children with ASD (autism spectrum disorder). Jaylen started riding Nick, one of our smaller horses. Then he was intentionally introduced to different horses to help him adjust to change more readily. Jaylen got to know each of the horses gradually and after a time became comfortable being around these large, gentle giants. He now happily rides even the larger horses.

“I can see Jaylen doing this for a long time,” said Amenia. “My child went from being nonverbal to verbal and improved his posture on and off the horse. Horse therapy works.”

To learn more about our Therapeutic Horsemanship program, visit AchievementCenters.org/tr or email Cory.Ramsey@AchievementCtrs.org.
The pandemic presented challenges for so many of us, and was especially difficult for individuals with disabilities in our community and their families. This has been true for our friend, Bronte, who is diagnosed on the autism spectrum and has learning disabilities. Bronte is typically an outgoing, happy, 26-year-old that thrives on being with friends. As she learned more about the virus in 2020, she became anxious, withdrawn, and she didn’t want to go outside of her home. Her mother, Jennifer, related that the pandemic really put a cloud over Bronte. After an entire year, her mother was determined to get her out to begin safely socializing and found the Therapeutic Horsemanship program at Camp Cheerful. Bronte said she would give the program a try and it turned out to be the key that opened her up to socializing again.

While in a horsemanship session, Bronte’s parents learned about the River Rock Adult Day Program, also at Camp Cheerful. They visited and toured to learn more, and decided it would be perfect for Bronte. “It’s more than I’ve ever seen in any program. They have a lot more interaction with the outdoors and they are busy doing a variety of activities,” said Jennifer.

“When Bronte returns home from her day in the River Rock program, I cannot count the times she says ‘I had fun’ and she tells me ‘I love my friends and my friends love me.’” Bronte added that her favorite things about her days in the River Rock program are “hanging out with my friends and learning new things every single day. Certain days, we go to the barn and help feed the horses, we go on nature walks, and I like the arts and crafts.”

Bronte now fully enjoys everything Camp Cheerful offers. Last year she played adapted soccer and tennis, attended the respite weekends with her friends, and is looking forward to playing on the new girl’s adapted football team!

To find out if your loved one is a good fit for our River Rock Adult Day Program, contact Alissa.Piwinski@Achievement Ctrs.org or 440.238.6200 x224.

Camp Cheerful is strengthened through its community partnerships. We were proud to host the Strongsville Chamber of Commerce meeting in April together with Hot Chicken Takeover. L to r: Chuck Hollingsworth, Chamber President; Amy Ferree, Chamber Executive Director; Joe DeLoss, Founder Hot Chicken Takeover; C. J. Stenzel, General Manager Hot Chicken Takeover; and Connie Boros, Achievement Centers’ Vice President of Recreation; Bernadette Kerrigan, Achievement Centers’ President and CEO.
Josh beams as he enters the soccer field at the Soccer Sportsplex in North Olmsted ready to get in the game. At nine years old, Josh loves all sports, whether he watches them in-person, on TV, or plays games on his Switch. His braces and walker are no barrier for this determined boy. His father, Ryan, said that “in soccer, Josh has benefitted through socialization with the other kids, improving his skills, stretching out his legs, and moving around. Being a part of the game is a real confidence booster for Josh.”

Ryan related, “As a parent, it’s hard to let go of your child. It’s hard to let them go out there, fall, and get up to do it again. It’s nice as a parent to sit in the stands and be able to cheer my son on for a change knowing Achievement Centers Adapted Sports staff and volunteers are doing the right things and keeping the kids safe.”

Ryan added, “Josh is a good kid who really enjoys sports, and I think it’s great that we have the Achievement Centers for Children giving him the opportunity to play.”
Camp Cheerful is celebrating 75 years and I too am celebrating an anniversary! I have had the privilege of sharing 10 years of memories with you—our campers, riders, athletes, Adult Day participants, families, donors, community supporters and an incredibly talented team of professionals—all who have worked to make Camp Cheerful the special place it is today. I have seen Camp Cheerful and the programs we offer grow and change to meet the needs of our campers and our community.

As I write this, I hear the clicking of the horses hooves as they pass by my office window. I know campers are looking forward to so much: seeing old friends and making new ones, glimpsing the sparkle in the horse’s eyes, the smell of s’mores on the campfire, and playing in the pool. Soon volunteers and players will be practicing football drills in the field and our River Rock friends can start their gardening projects outside! We look forward to making memories together and sharing all that Camp Cheerful has to offer for children and adults with disabilities for many years to come!

A Note from Connie Boros
Vice President of Recreation

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A Note from Bernie Kerrigan
President and CEO

Through the years, ACC’s Camp Cheerful has played an important role in the lives of thousands of children and adults with disabilities and their families. It seems like so many people I talk to in our community have a connection to our beloved camp. Like the individuals and families highlighted here in our newsletter, they all have personal stories of their connections. Some attended camp themselves, knew someone who was a camper, worked as camp staff, volunteered, or provided generous financial support. Whatever their involvement, their experiences with camp left a lasting and positive impression on their lives. Like all our programs at the Achievement Centers for Children, Camp Cheerful has been an integral part of the fabric of Northeast Ohio for many decades. I am so proud of our agency’s past and am pleased to be a part of this dynamic organization’s bright future!
OUR MISSION is to empower children and adults with disabilities and their families to achieve their greatest potential. We are a non-profit organization providing support, services and programs for children and adults with disabilities and special needs and their families.

Programs include education and autism school; physical, occupational and speech therapy; Intensive Therapy Clinic; family support services; recreation, camp, sports and adult day program.

A trusted partner unlocking the potential beyond disabilities

LOCATIONS
Highland Hills
Westlake
Camp Cheerful in Strongsville

Providing services in person, via telehealth and remote learning

AchievementCenters.org
216.292.9700

SPECIAL EVENTS Mark Your Calendar!

Join us on
SUNDAY, JUNE 26, 2022 for
A MOST EXCELLENT RACE
at the Achievement Centers for Children’s Camp Cheerful in Strongsville. Help support recreation programs.

AchievementCenters.org/race

Join us for the 38th anniversary
BLUE CHIP BLUE TEE
GOLF TOURNAMENT
MONDAY, AUGUST 1, 2022
at the beautiful Kirtland Country Club.

AchievementCenters.org/golf

Join us on
SATURDAY,
SEPTEMBER 24, 2022
for CHEERS TO CAMP CHEERFUL
Enjoy delicious bites, raffles, Barnyard Bingo and more.

AchievementCenters.org/events