

The Jeena Atmosphere

By Bala Sreekandath

When I think of Jeena what immediately comes to my mind are thoughts of great friends and great times! We started going to Jeena to find opportunities for our son Chandu, who has autism. Chandu is always relaxed and 'at home', when at Jeena. I think he feels accepted and for a change is also glad to be away from the ever-following parental gaze of Prathibha and me. When we are at Jeena we let Chandu go anywhere he wants to, and talk to anyone he wants to talk to and actually, leave him alone for a change. But that also afforded Prathibha and me, a sense of freedom to be ourselves without the need to constantly look over Chandu. We could really enjoy our time talking to other parents at Jeena and connecting at a very different level. It is tough for a lot of people to fathom the amount of anxiety that goes on in the minds of parents of special kids, especially when in big gatherings. Of course, for different kids the level of freedom for parents may vary. But I feel there is always an opportunity to have a better time for parents and their kids at Jeena compared to most other places.

We meet at Jeena for many different activities. It could be a talk by specialists on making a 'Special needs trust', or a discussion about Regional Center activities or sometimes for one of the many parties and so on and so forth. We have had Birthday, New Year, Christmas, Diwali, Easter and many different parties. Even though Chandu was into his teens by the time we got involved with Jeena, he always looked forward to Jeena events. For him, I guess it is always a place where he can socialize without being judged. Or maybe it was all the accepting parents, who really cared for him that he found all around. Of course not having his parents always close-by was big for him, not to mention good food at these parties, which Chandu never seems to mind one bit.

My first experience of the 'Jeena Atmosphere' as I call it, was during the 2007 Jeena Yahaan (the annual

day for Jeena). The programs were over and dinner was almost done. Then I sensed something happen. The well known Jeena DJs, Hart and Mindy got on stage and suddenly everything transformed. The tables and chairs moved aside as music flowed. Strobe lights turned on and a whole party atmosphere took over one and all. For the next couple of hours, Prathibha and I hardly saw Chandu. We had occasional glimpses of him dancing, talking to various people, walking around and for the first time being really on his own. This was totally new to us! We were in a huge hall and there were more than a couple of hundred people in the room. We all had a grand time with amazing music, dancing and great friends!

But the most memorable Jeena moments I always cherish are the ones from the 'Annual Jeena Summer Camp'. Every year we go to the Steven's Creek County Park (owned by Via services, now called the 'Via West Campus') and have an overnight camp. It can hardly be called camping as we sleep in dormitories. But then the point is that we don't really sleep much. We all sit around a big fire and talk and sing and have roasted



marshmallows and the works. Some brave souls last outside till the early hours of dawn.

The location just cannot be topped. The place is nestled in the foothills of the beautiful Santa Cruz Mountains, with nice big trees and greenery all around. The natural setting is made even better with access to a swimming pool, play areas, open spaces and many other activities for our kids. The kids have

a blast. But sometimes I feel the adults have a bigger blast. The fireplace fun at night is followed by the early morning nature hike that is customary. Of course the day does not end with out the dip in the pool and a fine lunch that follows. I would never dream of missing the

Annual Camp!

Yes, we got in touch with Jeena seeking opportunities for Chandu. We found those; but we also found a lifetime of amazing friends and great times!

