

Special Kids Day puts a smile on everyone's face

The National Cherry Festival is one of a kind in many ways. Perhaps one of the most important distinctions is that it is the only festival in the United States to provide a special program to entertain mentally and physically disabled children, according to Cindy Hitesman, director of special kids' activities.

Special Kids' Day has been a fundamental part of the

Cherry Festival since 1983. Since then, the program has grown by leaps and bounds. Only four children attended in 1983, but last year over 600 participated, some coming from all across the nation and even Canada.

"Last year was our biggest one ever," Hitesman said.

Special Kids' Day is 9 a.m. to noon Wednesday, July 7 at the Open Space.

Children will be able to

build their own cherry pies, participate in cherry pit spits, Oreo cookie stacking, bubble blows, basketball shoots and a local band will play from 9-10 a.m..

There will also be a wheelchair swing, face painting, kittens to pet from the Humane Society, rides on Traverse City's historic fire truck and Laura, a friendly pet elephant.

A wheelchair repair station provided by Thompson's Pharmacy will

be at the Open Space as well.

"I want to make sure people know about that," Hitesman said. "We had it last year, but most people didn't know about it, and a couple kids went home with damaged wheelchairs."

At 10:30 a.m., the operation will move to Arnold



Record-Eagle file photo/Meegan M. Reid

Physically and mentally challenged "special kids" will enjoy Casting for Kids Wednesday, July 7 from 9:30-12:30 a.m. — and kids of all ages can do the same 5:30 to 8:00 p.m., all at the Festival Open Space. The Children's Fishing Pond is presented by Fifth Third Bank and MC Sports.

Amusements midway park, where the children can enjoy free rides on a merry-go-round, a Ferris wheel, boats and more.

Hitesman said all the amusement park workers donate their time to the children.

"It's really cool because each kid gets to take a turn," Hitesman said. "It's just a really special time."

The park opens back up to the public at 12:30 p.m..

To pre-register a special needs child for Special Kids' Day, call 947-9283.

Special Kids' Day is sponsored by Tom's Food Markets, Glen's Markets and Oleson's Food Stores.

