

**BEACH LUAU PROM:** Volunteers help 90 enjoy themselves

# ENABLED TO HAVE A NIGHT OF FUN

By **JOSHUA BURD**  
STAFF WRITER

**WOODBIDGE** — Jimmy Cox spent a year in the hospital after an abnormal set of blood vessels — known as an arteriovenous malformation — ruptured in the right side of his brain. In the roughly eight years since, he has come far to rehabilitate the left side of his body, where he lost mobility because of the injury.

Movement in his leg is still somewhat limited, he said. But that couldn't stop the 19-year-old from enjoying himself Sunday at the Woodbridge Hotel and Conference Center, where he attended a special beach luau prom for young adults and teenagers with disabilities.

"Look out to the dance floor," Cox said. "You'll see me cutting up the rug."

The South Plainfield resident was among some 90 attendees at the midday event, hosted by the Children's Specialized Hospital and Meeting Professionals International of New Jersey, a trade group. The prom at the Route 1 hotel — complete with a disc

jockey, a buffet line, photography and a luau king, queen and court — gave them a chance to be among friends in a way that otherwise might not have been available.

"In some cases they're the only kid in their school who has a disability," said Amy Mansue, president and CEO of the hospital in Mountainside. "It's not always easy to find someone you can befriend."

The free event is one of many hosted by the hospital's Friday Night Fever program, which coordinates about one activity a month for teenagers with disabilities. The roughly eight-year-old program, which is bolstered by volunteers, takes the young people anywhere from Broadway musicals to shopping sprees to the boardwalk.

Children come to the program through referrals from friends or doctors, or

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through research by parents, said Michele Krosnick, a co-coordinator and physical therapist at Chil-

dren's Specialized Hospital.

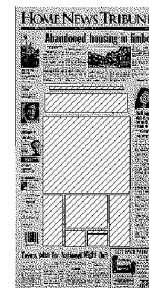
Boat rides at the Jersey Shore are among the favorite activities for Elizabeth Burbano, a 16-year-old East Hanover girl who has been with the program for about three years. Burbano, who has cerebral palsy, was attending her second prom.

"Other people look at them as handicapped, but in the group they're not. They can do anything," said her mother, Sofia.

Hospital officials said that as one of the program's biggest events, the prom benefits from the support of Meeting Professionals International of New Jersey, a trade association for the meeting industry. The group has been involved with Friday Night Fever since 2003.

"It's rewarding for us, and it's extremely rewarding for the children," said Joanne Joham, president of MPI New Jersey. "It's very exciting to see how happy they are."

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STAFF PHOTOS: MARK R. SULLIVAN

**Amy B. Mansue (left), president and CEO of Children's Specialized Hospital, helps out Elise Schoenemann of Westfield with her Plant a Palm Tree craft.**



**Nybil Ghanem of South Plainfield dances up a storm during the Beach Luau Prom.**



STAFF PHOTOS: MARK R. SULLIVAN

**Volunteer Cathi Salvatore (left) adjusts a lei on Christina Hegener of Roselle at the beach luau prom Sunday in Woodbridge for young people with disabilities.**



**Guests at the beach luau prom take to the dance floor Sunday at the Woodbridge Hotel and Conference Center.**