Newbury, N.H. — It’s just before 10 a.m. at Lake Sunapee State Beach, and Kyle McIntyre is, in the words of caregiver Bill Hays, “all smiles and giggles.”

It’s understandable that McIntyre is happy, and not only because of the warm and sunny conditions on the lake. Thanks to the New England Handicapped Sports Association kayaking program, the 24-year-old cerebral palsy patient from Newport gets to come out of his chair — and onto the water — for a couple hours every week.

It’s that time for McIntyre, who’s face and arms are being smothered in sunblock by Hays. McIntyre is beyond enthusiastic. “I do really good out there,” he says between spurts of laughter. “It’s really fun.”

It would be difficult for participants not to have a good time while kayaking with NEHSA, which had 10 volunteer/instructor staff members on hand Wednesday to complement NEHSA Student and Family Services Director Angela Neilson.

They help the disabled athletes get in and out of the kayaks, then guide them through their excursions on the water.

For those tending to participants with ailments such as traumatic brain injuries, it may be necessary to walk alongside the boats in shallow waters near the shoreline.

Others, like Washington, N.H., resident Jackie Parker, also 24, use small pontoon extensions — akin to training wheels on a bicycle — yet are fully capable of paddling themselves along. Accompanied by volunteers, Parker traveled about 1/4-mile from the boat launch on Wednesday, her farthest distance of the summer.

Parker’s mother, Ginny, stays at the shore to cheer her daughter on.

“It’s great to check on her progress. She adds distance every time,” Ginny Parker boasts. “It’s great to see her get more and more confident.”

NEHSA began in 1970 with eight members who skied at now-defunct Haystack Mountain in Wilmington, Vt. It became a non profit two years later and relocated to Mount Sunapee, where it now has more than 700 members and its own lodge. It holds skiing and snowboarding events on the mountain throughout the winter.
NEHSA offered only winter sports until 2006, when it began its kayaking programs from June through September, later adding classes for rowing and paddle boarding. While still not as popular as its snow sports scene, NEHSA’s summertime offerings have allowed hundreds of athletes with wide-ranging disabilities to enjoy themselves on the water in the warm months.

Angela Neilson has worked for NEHSA since 2004, the last six years as its student and family services director. She said adding the summer programs has made her job more rewarding, allowing her organization to reach more individuals with disabilities.

“I left the fast-paced corporate world (as a technical support engineer) for this job, and this is infinitely more rewarding,” Neilson said. “There are so many great stories that come through here. The connections that you make with (participants) is amazing.”

Like most professions, Neilson and her crew occasionally have to adjust to the unanticipated. On Wednesday, that came when a group of five participants from Robin Hill Farm — a network of residential brain injury treatment facilities headquartered in Deering, N.H. — arrived unexpectedly.

NEHSA was happy to accommodate.

“Sometimes, you just have to wing it,” Neilson said. “We preregister people all the way back in April, and we only had two people (listed) for today.”

The extra arrivals meant some additional planning for a volunteer base fronted by Lex Bundschuh, a 1978 Dartmouth College graduate who’s in her second year as NEHSA’s kayak program coordinator.

“It’s very rewarding to support a program like this, that gets people out of their wheelchairs and on the water in the summer,” Bundschuh said. “It’s invaluable.”

Robin Hill Farm lead staffer Alexis Wayland is grateful the facility’s residents have an outlet like NEHSA, even though it requires some traveling. It’s more than a 40-minute drive, one way, along state roads for the group, which also takes advantage of NEHSA’s winter sports offerings.

“It’s worth the ride because it’s a great program, and the only option we have for something like this,” Wayland said. “We pass by several ski areas and lakes on the way here, but none of them offer anything like this.”

Longtime NEHSA volunteer Todd Winslow travels even farther to help out — about 90 minutes, one way, from his home in Chelmsford, Mass.

“I’ve been volunteering for the ski program for about 18 years, and I come here off and on in the summer,” Winslow said. “It’s a lot different for (participants) being out here than it is on the ski hill. It’s a whole different kind of solitude. When they’re skiing, it’s kind of, ‘them vs. the mountain,’ whereas out here it’s just kind of enjoying nature and the environment.”

A little after 11 a.m., it’s time to switch paddlers. Participants like Robin Hill Farm resident Catherine Panniello have been patiently watching their cohorts splash and roam in the pristine waters, and now it’s their turn. Five people help Panniello’s friend, Ted Stebbins, get out of the kayak and back into his chair as Panniello drifts off with her own group of volunteers.

It’s also time for McIntyre to come out of the lake — as much as he’d like to stay in all day. Hays, his caregiver, won’t let him exit the water without getting a little wet. Going ankle-deep into the water to greet McIntyre, Hays dumps a plastic bottle of water over his head.

“Hey, that’s cold!” McIntyre shouts, bursting into laughter once more.