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## Creating community at camp

By **AMANDA K. METSKAS**

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Every time Camp Quest is in the news, I receive e-mails asking, "Why not just send kids to a camp where they can have fun? Why do you need to push your beliefs on them?"

I am the president of Camp Quest, the first sleepaway summer camp for kids from nonreligious families. And I'm happy to report that we do spend most of our time at camp having fun swimming, horseback riding, tie-dying and roasting marshmallows around the campfire. That's how camp should be.

But that's not what makes Camp Quest newsworthy.

We're newsworthy because we are a camp aimed at humanists and others who don't believe in God. We teach kids to be skeptical of religious claims. Actually, our campers learn that it's OK to raise questions about anything, be it politics, science or religion. We encourage them to speak and think for themselves -- to question what they're told, even if we're the ones telling them.

I wanted to write for the religion page to let readers know that, despite the obvious differences, atheists and believers have a lot more in common than you might expect.

The fact is, just like kids raised in any religious tradition, those from nonreligious families want to belong. They and their families need community. Humanist parents want to pass on values to their sons and daughters, just as parents who send their children to Catholic school or Lutheran camp want to pass on values to theirs. And those values -- honesty, compassion, responsibility -- are strikingly similar.

Then why have a camp for kids from nonreligious families? Our campers spend 51 weeks of the year living in a pervasively religious society. Most of their friends belong to majority religious groups. Before coming to Camp Quest, some of the 8- to 17-year-olds haven't met any other kids from atheistic or agnostic families. Religion is everywhere in America. The Boy Scouts explicitly exclude atheists from membership. Even the Little League pledge begins with "I trust in God."

At Camp Quest, they learn that their families aren't the only ones who are skeptical of religion. They learn that many American heroes like Pat Tillman, Kurt Vonnegut, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Thomas Jefferson were humanists, agnostics, atheists, deists, rationalists, skeptics or Freethinkers. Camp Quest provides kids with a community, a place to belong.

Religious groups have provided valuable community for their members for thousands of years, and only recently have humanists and atheists started to catch up by creating similar communities for families. The first Camp Quest opened in 1996 in Kentucky with 20 campers. It then moved to Ohio. We now also have five other locations -- in Tennessee, Minnesota, Michigan, California and Ontario, Canada, serving a total of 150 campers.

This year, we established our headquarters in Albany at the Institute for Humanist Studies. The institute has supported Camp Quest for many years through its grant program, which funds projects like humanist Sunday schools, charter schools and student groups on college campuses.

But just to put this humanist growth in perspective, Americans gave \$97 billion to religion last year, according to the Giving USA Foundation. Donations to humanist groups didn't even make the pie chart.

Everyone knows that kids are influenced all the time -- by their parents, their peers, their computers and their culture. That's why it's especially important to teach them values and tools to assess those influences.

Camp ends Sunday. But many kids will surely be back next summer along with a new crop of first-time campers.

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