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A camp they can believe in

Ohio's Camp Quest lets young atheists enjoy summer fun with like-minded children

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June 27, 2007

CLARKSVILLE, Ohio -- At the same time youngsters at Bible camps across the nation are reciting, "Now I lay me down to sleep; I pray the Lord my soul to keep," kids at Camp Quest are climbing into their bunks, confident there is no one out there to hear those prayers.

Proudly proclaiming the motto "Beyond Belief," Camp Quest bills itself as the nation's first sleep-away summer camp for atheists. Founded in 1996, it has inspired four similar camps across the nation for children whose parents are either opposed or indifferent to religion.









Much of what goes on here, amid the cornfields of southwestern Ohio, is little different from any other camp. Campers canoe on the Little Miami River, practice archery skills and go on nature hikes.

To be sure, they also engage in some unusual rainy-day discussions of philosophical issues. Children who barely come up to an adult's waist toss around terms such as "circular logic." And those nature hikes focus on the beauty of evolution, unaided by any unseen hand.

Atheism has been experiencing a revival, as it were. Some national surveys show the numbers of non-believers growing. Books hyper-critical of religion are best-sellers. The biologist Richard Dawkins argued in "The God Delusion" that religion is just that. Faith as the source of all evil was explored with burning passion by Christopher Hitchens in "God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything."

But more than a training ground for a movement, Camp Quest is a place to set down the burden of being different.

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Children who grow up in Christian households have the emotional security of being in the nation's majority. Members of religious minorities have similarly minded friends and relatives. But coming from a family that does not believe in God often sets a child on a lonely road.

Frieda Lindroth, a first-year camper, recognized that her first day at Camp Quest.

"Wow!" I said to myself, 'I'm not alone,'" said Frieda, 12. She recalls being an atheist since the 2nd grade.

For its inaugural season, Camp Quest drew 20 campers. This year, it enrolled 47 young people, ranging from 8 to 17 years old, for its weeklong session at a campground rented from a 4-H group. About 100 others will attend Quest's daughter camps in Michigan, Minnesota, California and Ontario, Canada.

A Harris Interactive survey in 2003 found that 9 percent of Americans don't believe in God, while another 12 percent are uncertain about the issue. Even if their numbers are lower, the Secular Coalition for America calculates that the ranks of non-believers are larger than the combined number of religious Jews, Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, Presbyterians, Hindus, Muslims and Eastern Orthodox Christians.

Camp Quest's founder, Edwin Kagin, thinks non-believers have become more outspoken as a reaction to the religious right. School boards have inserted "intelligent design" into their curricula almost as fast as the courts can veto such measures.

Kagin and his wife, Helen, founded Camp Quest out of frustration with what they saw as a forced march to theocracy. His father was a minister in a family line of Presbyterian clergy tracing back to John Knox, the great Scottish reformer.

"But I went to college and started reading books my father had preached against," said Kagin, 66.

Kagin has a full beard, a rolling gait and a sardonic delivery reminiscent of Mark Twain, as played by Hal Holbrook. He became active in atheist causes but was frustrated by lawyers hired to fight them. So he got a law degree and became the legal director of the activist group American Atheists.

In the 1990s, the Boy Scouts, a chief sponsor of camping in America, began excluding atheists and gays from its leadership. That prompted the Kagins to create an outdoorsy alternative for non-believers.

"We wanted a camp not to preach there is no God," said Kagin, "but as a place where children could learn it's OK not to believe in God."

Many Camp Questers have wrestled with that issue on their own, among them Sophia Riehemann, a 9th-year camper. She long avoided the words "under God," during recitations of the Pledge of Allegiance at school.

"This year, I stopped getting up and saying the Pledge," said Riehemann, 16, who, like other campers, reports that it is taxing constantly negotiating with the world of believers. "Here at camp, that little barrier is finally down."

Like many campers, Riehemann comes from a home that stresses a scientific explanation of reality in place of the biblical account. Similarly, the dining room walls at Camp Quest are hung with portraits of notable free-thinkers and scientists, ranging from Darwin and Einstein to Woody Allen, honored for giving comedic expression to religious skepticism.

Riehemann notes that a secular perspective takes away childhood joys other kids have, such as Christmas. But that doesn't bother her. "They have Santa Claus," she said, "and we have Isaac Newton."

Like Riehemann, other campers report the painful experience of publicly declaring their lack of religious belief. Like gay people, they call it "coming out."

Allison Page, 9, read a book of Bible stories and decided they "were just silly." When her classmates found that out, they called her names and threatened her. That prompted her parents to home-school Allison. They sent her to camp so she would have summertime playmates.

Allison reports finding the Bible incompatible with her experience of life. An only child who'd like to have siblings, she was stumped by the story of Cain and Abel.

"It just doesn't make sense," Allison said. "A brother wouldn't kill his brother."

Sheridan Scott, 10, encountered hostility on the front lines of atheist activism. He and his mother are part of a group of Florida atheists that raises the banner for non-belief in public places.

"As a hobby," he explained. "But some people are so hostile, yelling at us: 'You will go to Hell.'"

Ed Golly, a camp counselor, belongs to the Florida atheist-activist group. When members saw Christian revivalists preaching on the streets of a Tampa night-club district, they mounted counterdemonstrations.

"We hold up banners saying, 'Jesus is not Coming' and 'No Prayer in School,'" said Golly, 55, a volunteer like all the staff.

A small-craft pilot, Golly flies his airplane to camp and takes campers up in it. They gleefully report that, at least as high as a Cessna can go, there is no evidence for a God in the sky.

Much of the learning at Camp Quest is similarly non-directive. Atheism isn't so much advocated as set alongside traditional belief systems. There are meal-time talks on various religions. Campers debate questions such as, "Would the world be better off without religion?"

Many of the young people come to more measured conclusions than Dawkins and Hitchens, acknowledging religion has some virtues, like providing some people a sense of community.

But at the final campfire, it was obvious how most Camp Questers come down on the question of belief. The young people giggled and laughed through skits and songs, savoring for one last moment being just one of the gang.

For the concluding act, Edwin Kagin stood in front of the crackling flames, pounding an oversized walking stick worthy of a biblical prophet. He broadly impersonated an evangelical preacher, exhorting his congregation to believe in the unseen.

"Who needs proof, if we have faith?" he asked.

All around the campfire, young hands went up.

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