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Summer Camp That's a Piece of Heaven for the Children, but Please, No Worshipping

By SUSAN HANSEN
Published: June 29, 2005

HAMILTON, Ohio, June 25 - Fresh from a week at Camp Quest in southern Ohio, Alex Houseman can boast that his badminton game is a little better, his archery skills are a little sharper and he can now crank out tie-dye T-shirts on demand.

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Mike Simons for the New York Times

Campers at Camp Quest laugh at skits during the camp's closing ceremony. [More Photos >](#)

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All that, and 12-year-old Alex got a rare chance to be around other children just like him - children whose parents do not go to church or any other place of worship, and who do not necessarily believe in God.

At the public school he attends in Boone County, Ky., he said, he has learned to keep quiet about the fact that his family left the fundamentalist Christian church it used to belong to, that his father now considers himself an atheist, and that his mother, if she believes in God at all, does not do so in

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Mike Simons for the New York Times

Camper Nicole Ward, 12, and councilor Tracie Wood, right, act out a skit about evolution. [More Photos >](#)

a conventional way.

At Camp Quest, on the other hand, he was not worried that his fellow campers would judge him. "It's good to know there are other people out there who don't believe in God," he said.

Providing a haven for the children of nonbelievers is what Camp Quest is all about. As the camp's official T-shirt announces, it's a place that's "beyond belief." More precisely, it claims to be the first summer sleep-away camp in the country for atheist, agnostic and secular humanist children.

Nearly two million American adults openly identify themselves as atheist or agnostic, according to a 2001 survey by the Graduate Center of

the City University of New York. As a group, they face more than their share of bigotry, said Edwin F. Kagin, Camp Quest's longtime director, and their children are often made to feel like outcasts.

Many of the two dozen campers who attended this year's session last week recounted experiences of being called names and otherwise harassed. For instance, Travis Leepers, 17, from Louisiana, reported that just about everyone he knows has expressed concern to him about his soul and has tried to convert him.

Sophia Riehemann, 14, from Bellevue, Ky., recalled how one of her schoolmates called her a devil-worshiper. "People get really confused sometimes," Sophia said. "They think that if we don't believe in God we believe in the devil."

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At Camp Quest, children age 8 to 17 take part in all the usual summer camp activities. But in addition to horseback riding, organized water balloon fights and outdoor survival lessons, the camp's volunteer staff aims to promote a healthy respect for science and rational inquiry, while assuring campers that there is nothing wrong with not believing in the Bible and not putting stock in a supreme creator.

"We're serving as a night light in a dark and scary room," said Mr. Kagin, who started the nonprofit camp in 1996, along with other members of the Free Inquiry Group in the Cincinnati and northern Kentucky area, a secular humanist organization. The cost for the weeklong session is \$650.

With his booming voice and his penchant for khaki-colored canvas hats and garb, Mr. Kagin, 64, looks like a summer camp director. Besides being director of the Kentucky chapter of American Atheists, he is also a certified Eagle Scout.

And in other ways - the unappetizing food, for example, or the 7:30 a.m. bullhorn calls badgering campers to wake up - Quest is much like any other summer camp. (It rents the cabins and other facilities from a Y.M.C.A.-owned camp.)

There are also obvious differences.

At the wooden barn that served as the main mess hall, the camp's program director, Fred Edwards, set up posters of famous atheists and free thinkers in world history like Bertrand Russell, Albert Einstein and Margaret Sanger, and after meals he presented talks on the contributions they had made.

At the opening campfire ceremony, Mr. Kagin issued a set of challenges for campers to respond to in skits on the final night of camp. One such challenge: Help residents of the faraway planet Questerion understand how life on earth came into being. Another challenge: Prove that the two invisible unicorns in residence do not exist.

As in years past, camp leaders also worked on presentations in science and other natural (as opposed to supernatural) phenomena. This year's subjects were raptors and meteorology, including a demonstration of a portable weather station. Also, Gene Kritsky, a biology professor at

the nearby College of Mount St. Joseph, talked to campers about creationism, arguing that the theories used to try to disprove evolution fail to hold up.

Not all the programming is a hit. "Some of the presentations are really boring," said Caitlin Fox, 13, from Mansfield, N.J., who thought the session on swords and other medieval weaponry dragged on too long.

For his part, Tomás Aguilar, 16, a Chicago native, thought the presentations on famous free thinkers like Ted Turner, the founder of CNN, could have used more balance. "Fred paints them in only a positive light," he said of the program director.

Tomás said he liked the way Mr. Kagin and other camp leaders tried to inspire critical thinking. But for him, the best thing about Camp Quest was seeing friends from previous years and getting to go swimming every day and run around. "I'm here just to have fun," he said.

Staff members conceded that sometimes the programming had been too didactic. In recent years, they said, they have adjusted the balance to include more activities that are purely fun. Also, as a new generation of camp leaders has taken over, different sorts of lectures have been added, including talks this year and last on various religions, to broaden campers' perspectives and keep the programming fresh.

With Mr. Kagin and his wife, Helen, retiring this year as the camp's leaders, other changes may also be in store. Still, the camp's new director, August Brunsman, 28, promised that the primary mission - giving the children of nonbelievers a sense of community - would remain the same.

Parents like Lev Pinskiy, a computer programmer from Brooklyn, are not looking for any major overhaul. In fact, Mr. Pinskiy, a Russian immigrant, values the camp so much that he let his son, Eugene, 11, skip the last week of school to attend this year's session.

"There's no other place like it in the United States, for sure," said Mr. Pinskiy, adding that he had searched the American Camp Association catalog in vain to find a

nonreligious summer program that still offered all the activities of a traditional summer camp.

"This is a complete experience," added Mr. Pinskiy, who finally found Camp Quest by doing a Google search.

Sarah Silverman, 17, from Camp Hill, Pa., agreed. She liked Camp Quest so much that she has attended for three summers and is planning to return next year as a volunteer counselor.

Sarah has also been doing her part to recruit new campers.

"I tell my Christian friends they'd love it here," she said.

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