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Newsday.com

Non-religious summer camps develop niche

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May 18, 2008

ALBANY, N.Y.

When Joe Fox sends his daughters away to summer camp, he's confident they'll be surrounded by kids who share his family's beliefs and values.

Caitlin, 16, and Elizabeth, 10, go to Camp Quest, which in 1996 created a niche getaway for children who are agnostic, atheist, or just not sure what to believe yet.

Parents have plenty of summer camp options from Boy Scout and Girl Scouts to the YMCA to soccer, dance, music and drama camps. Many claim no religious affiliation while others are specifically Jewish, Catholic or fundamentalist Christian. The Camp Quest concept started in 1996 with 20 kids at a site in Ohio with the slogan "Beyond Belief."

Since then, demand has grown and weeklong camps have been added in Minnesota, Michigan, Ontario, California and Tennessee. In 2007 the camps accommodated 150 kids, generally ages 8-17. The projection for 2008 is more than 200 campers and new camps are also being considered in Vermont and the United Kingdom.

"They're good, moral kids without organized religion," Fox said of his daughters. "They can feel comfortable being who they are."

The family, from Furlong, Penn., has been sending their kids to the camps for years, even though it's more expensive and difficult to send them out of state instead of to a local camp.

Most Americans believe in some form of God _ 94 percent according to a 2007 survey from the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life. And 53 percent have an unfavorable view of atheists. Kids who attend the camp are not required to be atheists, or anything at all, said Amanda Metskas, president of Camp Quest Inc.

"We really try not to label the kids," she said. "When a kid is 8 or 10, asking them to say 'I'm an atheist,' or



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'I'm a Catholic' _ at 8 or 10 we don't think that kids are able to make a decision about their world view."

Camp Quest is a not-for-profit backed by the Albany, N.Y.-based Institute for Humanist studies, a think tank supporting the nonreligious Humanist philosophy, which emphasizes science, evolution, compassion and critical thinking.

At mealtime, kids learn about what the camp calls "freethinkers" throughout history _ defining them as people who questioned or rejected religion. Examples can include people who believed in some version of a higher power, but held ideas conflicting with the social norm. Some freethinkers include: cycling champion Lance Armstrong, science fiction writer Isaac Asimov, women's rights pioneer Susan B. Anthony, abolitionist Frederick Douglass and author Alice Walker, who wrote "The Color Purple."

Campers are exposed to science and learn about evolution. They also participate in typical outdoor camp activities, including swimming, horseback riding and roasting marshmallows.

The counselors will sometimes discuss world religions and philosophies. They say the focus is not on what is "wrong" about other beliefs, but they do sometimes use examples from religions when talking about errors in critical thinking.

In one exercise, counselors tell the kids about different invisible creatures that live in the camp and then challenge the campers to prove that they don't exist. In some cases, it's a pair of unicorns, in other cases, a dragon. In each instance, the campers are told they can't see, touch or taste the creatures.

The point is that a belief isn't automatically valid just because it can't be proven wrong. The exercise is supposed to help kids who don't believe in God prepare for questions from their peers who ask them to prove a higher power doesn't exist.

If campers manage to prove the creatures don't exist, the prize is a \$100 bill from before 1954 _ when the government put "In God We Trust" on U.S. currency.

Camper Caitlin Fox, 16, said the camp has helped her build confidence.

"Before I attended I used to feel really embarrassed," she said. "I was afraid my friends would reject me if I said I didn't believe in some higher power."

Critics say the camps appear to espouse a particular point of view.

"Obviously that's a metaphor for God," Dr. Erika Chopich, Ph.D., said of the invisible creatures exercise. Chopich is a psychotherapist, reverend and founder of the nonprofit Hope America Ministries Foundation. "It's clearly meant to teach that God cannot possibly exist ... There's obviously some teaching going on, there's some philosophy there. It's not completely neutral."

Lev Pinskiy, of Brooklyn, sends his son, Eugene, 14, and daughter, Margaret, 9, to Camp Quest because he wants them to have a sense of belonging.

Pinskiy considers himself a Humanist and was raised without organized religion, but he came from a Jewish background, while his wife was raised in the Russian Orthodox Church. In separate incidents, Pinskiy felt

his children were rejected by both religious communities because neither considered the children to be their own.

"I don't want my children to feel isolated and like second class citizens, because they're not," Pinskiy said. "They have _ as I do _ a strong system of morals and rules for behavior."

Pinskiy said Camp Quest has helped his family _ especially his children _ become more confident about their own disbelief.

"Nobody wants to live alone in a bubble," Pinskiy said. "So it's extremely nice to find similarly minded people with the same world view."

On the Net: <http://www.camp-quest.org/>

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