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Camp: "It's Beyond Belief"

There is no God, but there is horse riding; Summer camp is for atheists, agnostics

BY MICHAEL D. CLARK | ENQUIRER STAFF WRITER

ST. CLAIR TWP. - It's summer camp time in America, but few camps are quite like this one.

This week, 31 atheist and agnostic youths from Ohio, Kentucky, New York and other states have gathered in Butler County for Camp Quest, one of a handful of summer camps nationwide where children are taught there is no God.

Armed with its motto "It's Beyond Belief!" Camp Quest is an alternative to religious-oriented summer camps.

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Children and teens learn about the canons of rational thought, critical thinking and scientific inquiry. They're also taught to stand up for their secular beliefs while living in a world of religious believers who might question their values.

Besides the usual camp activities such as canoeing and horseback riding, campers tackle serious discussions of atheistic, agnostic and deist philosophies. They learn about famous figures - such as Charles Darwin and Carl Sagan - who shared a disbelief in a supreme being who oversees humanity.

"It's kind of an oasis for us," explains Sophia Riehemann, 16, of Bellevue. "But people who don't know me well think we come here and devil-worship or something stupid like that."

Nonbelievers make up about 14 percent of the U.S. population, according to the American Religious Identification Survey conducted by City University of New York in 2001.

Camp Quest started in Northern Kentucky in 1996.

In recent years, the camps have been held at Camp Campbell Gard in St. Clair Township. The local camp, with 31 participants, is the largest of six camps operating around the U.S.

All told, the six camps, which cost \$550 to attend, will draw about 120 participants, said Amanda Metskas, president of the Camp Quest board. The numbers might appear low, but "a lot of atheists don't tend to be joiners, and a lot of atheists and agnostics are not members of groups," said Metskas.

The six summer camps this year are up from four offered last year, she said.

Christians, or members of any other religion, are not excluded.

Camp Campbell Gard is operated by the Christian-based Great Miami Valley YMCA.

Metskas agreed to a recent interview - along with a handful of campers - away from camp premises because she said YMCA officials have ordered them not to publicly link the secular summer camp to the YMCA.

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PHOTOS PROVIDED BY CAMP QUEST

Campers play the "human knot" game. At far right is Hensley Akiboh, 18, a former camper and now a camp counselor. The campers said they like the intellectual games, including an "invisible unicorn" exercise. Campers must try to prove that imaginary unicorns - as a metaphor for God - don't exist.

Camp mission

The Camp Quest mission statement says its purpose is to "provide children of irreligious parents a residential summer camp dedicated to improving the human condition through rational inquiry, critical and creative thinking, scientific method, self-respect, ethics, competency, democracy, free speech, and the separation of religion and government guaranteed by the Constitution of the United States."

More information at www.camp-quest.org.



Alex Bock, 13, and Rachel Thomas, 17, take a ride on the Little Miami River during their Camp Quest week.

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But Rick Taylor, executive director of YMCA Camp Campbell Gard, said he has no problems

leasing the camp to a nonreligious group.

"We really pride ourselves on inclusion," said Taylor. "We are firmly committed to promoting a summer camping experience to all children despite their backgrounds."

Most of the children attend the camp at the encouragement of their parents, said Metskas

Alex Bock, 13, traveled from Buffalo, N.Y., to mingle for the first time with fellow atheists in a summer camp setting.

"My father's side of the family are atheists and so is my grandmother and she told me about the camp," said Alex. "It's kind of odd that I have to go all the way from Buffalo to Ohio to attend. But I really, really like it. The people here aren't weird."

Hensley Akiboh, 18, from Indianapolis, said his family "used to be Christian, but we became more free-thinking.

"Through most of my life I found I had to kind of censor myself around other people, but this camp has definitely helped me figure out whether I wanted to lead a religious life or continue with an atheist life." The campers said they like the intellectual games, including an "invisible unicorn" exercise. Campers must try to prove that imaginary unicorns - as a metaphor for God - don't exist.

"You can't prove a negative," Metskas said of the lesson.

"A lot of times in these kids' lives they are asked to prove there is no evidence of God. We teach them the burden of proof lies with the person making the claim."

Phil Burress, president of Sharonville-based Citizens for Community Values, said, "It's amazing that they are teaching kids not to believe in God. I feel sorry for them."

He said the small number of participants nationwide reveals the camp's limited appeal.

"Their numbers are not growing. And they are pushing the myth of separation of church and state in America," he said. "But if you look at the Founding Fathers, they incorporated God into our nation's founding documents."

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Last Updated: 7:53 am | Friday, July 21, 2006

Quest took a while to find a home Founded in N.Ky.

BY KAREN GUTIERREZ | ENQUIRER STAFF WRITER

Camp Quest originated in Northern Kentucky.

Its founders include Helen and Edwin Kagin of Union, and its first location in 1996 was the Bullitsburg Baptist Church Camp in Boone County.

There was friction between the church hierarchy and the camp's atheist leaders, however, so after two years, Camp Quest moved to Lebanon, Ohio, and then to its current location.

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Edwin Kagin, a lawyer, and his wife, Helen, served as co-directors for 10 years. They retired last year from the volunteer positions, but they remain involved. Edwin Kagin is presenting a session today on wilderness survival skills.

"I am an Eagle Scout, and I got the idea for this when I first learned that the Boy Scouts were excluding atheist boys from the membership," Edwin Kagin said.

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ZOOM

Alex Bock, 13, and Rachel Thomas, 17, take a canoe ride on the Little Miami River.



Edwin Kagin

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