



WILMINGTON News Journal

ONLINE

Friday, June 22, 2007

A summer camp beyond belief *Young skeptics hold camp in Clinton County*

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Above, Macailia of Barberton and Lena Tvedten of Quitman, Ark. enjoy S'mores together this week at Camp Quest. This is the 12th year for what's called Camp Quest and the first time for the host campground to be in Clinton County. Forty-eight campers registered for this week's session at Camp Graham. CONTRIBUTED PHOTO/BRIAN UNDERWOOD, CAMP COUNSELOR

When the kids attending summer camp this week at a campground near Clarksville gather near the campfire at night, it's unlikely they will think there's a God in Heaven watching out for them beyond the starry sky. The youths who register for the camp session, where they're encouraged to be inquiring freethinkers, often doubt or deny a supreme being exists.

This is the 12th year for what's called Camp Quest and the first time for the host campground to be in Clinton County.

Camp Quest is the first residential summer camp in U.S. history for the children of atheists, skeptics, freethinkers and humanists. Camp Quest started in 1996 at a campground in northern Kentucky and later moved to Ohio. The program has expanded to five additional camps around North America: California, Minnesota, Michigan, Ontario and a Tennessee camp which is on hiatus this summer.

Forty-eight campers registered for this week's session at Camp Graham in Clinton County, a record high, said Amanda Metskas, president of Camp Quest Inc.

"If you add up all five of the Camp Quest sessions running this summer, I expect a total of around 150 kids," she said.

Many of the daily activities are typical summer camp experiences, such as archery, canoeing, crafts, high ropes courses, singing, volleyball, swimming and water balloon or sponge fights.

Less common are discussions about famous people, either living or dead, who are or were an atheist or religious skeptic. Examples of American freethinkers include abolitionist Frederick Douglass, actress Jodie Foster, actor Christopher Reeves, contemporary writer Alice Walker and American Revolution pamphleteer Thomas Paine, who was called an infidel among other things.

At meals where they don't cover freethinkers, a world religion or philosophy is briefly addressed.

"These are not 'this is what is wrong with what these people think' sessions. That said, we do occasionally use examples from religions when talking about errors in critical thinking," according to the Camp Quest Web site.

Metskas said, "We make it very clear [to parents] that we don't indoctrinate campers. We teach kids to think critically about their world and to be respectful of people with different worldviews."

Sometimes the campers, especially those from the more rural areas, don't know anyone other than their parents who isn't religious, and that inspires their parents to send them to Camp Quest, said Metskas.

"One family who has sent campers to Camp Quest for years started sending their kids when their daughter came home crying from school one day and asked if they were the only family who doesn't believe in God," she said.

Meeting other like-minded campers and making friends is a big part of the reason kids go to Camp Quest, Metskas said.

"Many of our campers return year after year to reconnect with friends from all over the country," she said.

Camp Quest has been gaining popularity and interest every year, said Metskas, adding it would be hard to point to any one cause of the increase.

"Mainly, I think that as more people find out about our programs, we attract more campers," Metskas said.

All camp staff members are volunteers. There is a biology professor from the University of Kentucky who leads a lot of the science activities. A graduate student in religious studies runs a comparative religions program at camp. Fred Edwards, communications director for the American Humanist Association, is the camp programs director, and he teaches campers about well-known freethinkers.

The camp director, August Brunsman IV, is executive director of the Secular Student Alliance, a non-profit that supports student humanist and skeptic groups.

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