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Photos available on request

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Cohen Camps Celebrate Milestones, Generations of Campers

When Michelle Kaufman's two daughters were born, she knew immediately what to give them: summers at Camp Pembroke.

"I think it's the most wonderful experience, the greatest gift you could ever give a child," said Kaufman, a Camp Pembroke alumna of 11 summers and mother of two campers.

This August, when Kaufman arrives at the 75th Camp Pembroke Reunion, one of her dreams will be achieved: she will be at camp with her girls. "Camp provided me with the foundation for my Judaism. It is the most comforting place in the whole world."

Whether it is services in the Pine Grove, banging on tables to *birkat hamazon* in the dining hall or fireworks over the lake, these are how summer camp memories are made at the Cohen Foundation Camps, Pembroke, Tevya and Tel Noar. As the three camps are poised to celebrate their 75th, 70th and 65th anniversaries respectively, many alumni are stepping forward to wax nostalgic about the true contribution these camps made to their adult lives.

At a time when research, both secular and Jewish, is available to laud the value of a camp experience, there are also the anecdotes. Whether it is singing silly camp songs in a car to pass a long trip or reminiscing about a particular four-square game, the Cohen Camps are now reaching into a third generation of campers with a success formula that has led to their longevity.

Ellen Yesley Silberman looked at only one camp for her three sons, Camp Tevya. “We’ve got Tevya blood,” she explained, noting that she and her husband and even her father went to Tevya. It is where she met her husband of 25 years. “When I think of myself being Jewish, I think of camp. Jewish camping is Jewish spirituality because you are living it every minute while you are at camp and it just becomes part of what you do,” said Silberman.

The Cohen camps were founded by Eli and Bessie Cohen and the Cohen Foundation today is still run by their son, Arnold Cohen and his son Jonathan Cohen. Arnold Cohen explains that in the beginning, his father, Eli Cohen, worked with other people and the YMHA movement to found Camp Bauercrest in Amesbury, a Jewish camp for boys. Seeing a similar need for girls, he started Camp Pembroke himself and a few years later, started Camp Tevya, originally as a fresh air camp for inner city Jewish kids. Five years later, he started Camp Tel Noar for young adults, ages 18 to 25, as a way to get involved in the Zionist movement.

Gloria Long, 80, is still an active alumna of the Camp Tel Noar Lodge, the Zionist program, and she returns to Camp Tel Noar each summer for an alumni Shabbat weekend, enjoying those alumni she has met over the years who share the bond of camp. “It was such an important part of my life and when I go back, it brings back a lot of fond memories.”

Ultimately, all three camps evolved into tuition-based Jewish overnight camps, serving approximately 1,200 campers collectively, complete with a full roster of activities, *ruach* (spirit) and an immersion in Jewish life. “It was about being Jewish in a happy place, not a setting like Hebrew school, but an informal Jewish education that became an unconscious part of their whole life – this was our mission.” He knows they have succeeded with so many people because they still get letters from people “who attest to the impact of camp on their whole lives.”

Eliot Spack, retired director of CAJE and active in his own Jewish community, is someone who spent the better part of his younger years at the Cohen Foundation camps. Spack’s father was the first director of Camp Tel Noar and the head of culture for Camp Tevya. Eliot and his brother Norman attended Camp Tevya for many years as both campers and counselors. Spack and his wife spent a Shabbat at Camp Tevya last summer as guests of Arnold and Annebelle Cohen and plan to be at the reunion this June.

“I also had an outstanding home and synagogue environment, but camp was extremely helpful to me and my friends. Camp has an ambience. Clearly Shabbat is a different day at camp. The names of the bunks are drawn from cities and kibbutzim in Israel,” said Spack.

As he stayed in touch with his many friends from camp into their adult lives, he watched many who did not grow up with same solid Jewish upbringing as he did, turn into adults with successful professional careers and active Jewish lives.

So what does camp give a child?

The American Camping Association last year conducted the largest research study of camper outcomes ever conducted in the United States. A total of 5,000 camp families and 80 ACA-accredited camps participated in the groundbreaking study. The results provide scientific evidence that camp is, “a positive force in youth development.” Parents, campers and camp staff report that children show significant growth in positive identity, social skills, physical and thinking skills, positive values and spirituality. Data shows that camp increases self-esteem and independence and that those increases are present at least six months after camp.

“In college, you can always tell who went to camp and who didn’t. You see some independence, being used to not having mom and dad around to do things for you,” said Jill Gordon, an alumna of Camp Tel Noar and parents of two campers.

Amy Sales, associate director of the Brandeis University Center for Modern Jewish Studies has been studying Jewish summer camp since 2000. Using their own research and that from the Connections and Journeys research sponsored by UJA and conducted by Dr. Bethamie Horowitz, one can conclude that experiences that were positive, voluntary and cumulative have a positive impact on Jewish identity and tend to lead to greater commitment.

Camp tends to meet these criteria, explained Sales. For most kids who go, it is a really positive experience with the purpose of fun and friendship. It is voluntary in that there is a choice to go or not and cumulative in that children tend to come year after year.

“This is very true of Cohen Foundation camps. It is not that camp is working magic in one or two months, but that they have them at every age of their development and camp is appropriately having an impact,” said Sales. “The community is strong and kids come back. Camp has the greatest opportunity of meeting the three criteria that retrospectively from an adult perspective makes the difference.”

Asking whether things that happen at camp carry over into the subsequent school year or into adulthood when former campers are thinking about marrying and settling down is tricky to measure, but the ACA research shows that clearly, camp has demonstrated positive effects on children’s development and helps them mature in terms of their social life, group living and formation of friendships.

“At a Jewish camp, this happens with a Jewish flavor and it is not taking us so far from the data to say that it is a smart developmental move for parents to make. For kids for whom camp is right, it is rather extraordinary, a great great invention,” said Sales.

The purity and timelessness of a camp experience is what brings people back year after year and generation after generation, said Anne Glanz, a Camp Tel Noar parent and alumni along with her husband. “If you asked a teenager to sing at the table and get into it, they would think you were nuts, but at camp they can be that person and it’s fun and cool. Camp has done wonders for my husband and me and for my children.”

Debbie Kublin went to Camp Pembroke for many years and worked as a counselor at Camp Tel Noar. She has seen first-hand the cumulative effect of a camp experience on her own life and the lives of her daughters. She is always meeting people from camp on various committees or even during a workout at the JCC. Both Kublin and her daughters socialized in college with camp friends and still do.

“One year my daughter made color war captain and it was so exciting. I was reliving it again. They had the jobs I had and I knew what they were going through,” said Kublin. When camp ended and her girls were moping, they sang the camp songs to cheer themselves up.

Kublin, who is working on the Pembroke Reunion Committee said the decision to hold the reunion at camp during the August session of camp was easy. “We want to show the love. It doesn’t end when camp ends. It is still there.”

The Camp Tevya Reunion is Saturday, June 27, 2009, 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., at Camp Tevya, with Shabbat services at 10 a.m., lunch at 11:45 and a free afternoon to socialize and reunite with friends. For more information, directions or to register, visit www.camptevyva.org.

The Camp Pembroke Reunion is Saturday, August 8 from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. at Camp Pembroke with Shabbat services at 10:30 a.m., lunch at noon and an afternoon program. For more information, directions or to register, visit www.camppembroke.org.

The Camp Tel Noar Alumni Shabbat is June 27, 2009, 9:45 a.m. to 2 p.m., at Camp Tel Noar, with Shabbat services at 10 a.m., lunch at 11:45 and a free afternoon to socialize and reunite with friends. For more information, directions or to register, visit www.camptelnoar.org.