



## **'We all know why we're here'**

**At America's Camp, kids who lost parents on Sept. 11 can dance, laugh, and talk about loss**

**By Bella English, Globe Staff, 8/23/2003**

LENOX -- It's somewhere between the taco line and the salad bar that the place erupts. A counselor has commandeered the mike to announce a dance break. The Spice Girls' highly danceable "Wannabe" fills the mess hall. Little kids, big kids, and counselors leap to their feet. Who cares about the tater tots, which are growing cold, when you can shake your booty?

The smallest campers are on the shoulders of the largest counselors. Others jump up on their chairs. Even the Brooklyn Cyclones -- the New York Mets' farm team -- leave their heaping plates of food to dance. When the tape stops, the chant goes up: "One more song! One more song!"

America's Camp is not just another private enclave nestled in the green hills of the Berkshires. There's a police officer stationed at the entrance to check IDs. There's one counselor per child, with more to spare. Except for kitchen and maintenance workers, the entire staff is volunteer, from the camp doctor to the camp priest to the counselors, who were selected by being the best at their home camps.

The kids are those whose fathers or mothers never came home from work on Sept. 11, 2001. Their parents were New York City police officers, firefighters, and rescue workers. They were dishwashers and business executives. They were lawyers, pilots, and flight attendants.

The weeklong camp, in its second summer, is cosponsored by the Twin Towers Fund, which raised \$215 million for the rescue workers at the World Trade Center, and CampGroup, a consortium of eight camps in Massachusetts and New Hampshire. Held at Camp Mah-Kee-Nac through tomorrow, the overnight camp provides a week of athletic and artistic

activities, celebrity guests, and field trips for the 137 kids who signed up this summer -- nearly double the number who attended last year.

Nine-year-old Julia Coombs is away from home for the first time -- and she hasn't looked back. "My mom said she'd pick me up if I needed it, but I won't," says Julia, whose father, Jeff, was killed on American Airlines Flight 11. This week, she has been making a fold-up stool in the woodshop and was thrilled to get up on water skis for the first time. She also has come to love the meal-time dance ritual. "They're crazy in the mess hall! Crazy! But it's fun."

On the bed in her cabin is a pillow autographed by her older sister and brother, her mother, and her new camp friends. Her mother also mailed a huge goody bag for her to share with her bunkmates. "She's never been out of my sight except overnight," says Christie Coombs, who lives in Abington. "But the upside is that these counselors are going to be on those kids with hawk eyes. They don't want to be calling us with bad news. At camp, the kids are just being normal kids, but they all know everyone there has lost a parent."

The Rev. Peter Precourt, who has been at camp both years, noted as much at his opening lakeside service. "This is a special camp," he told the crowd. "We all know why we're here. Why don't we just take a moment to remember those people we loved and lost on Sept. 11?" Heads bowed, and a few tears slid down young cheeks. After a pause, he concluded: "Let's support each other and have a great, fun-filled week!"

The kids scattered -- some to swim or boat, others to play tennis, negotiate the ropes course, play softball and basketball, or dance. Throughout the week, there have been events such as a carnival, a trip to Jiminy Peak, an "American Idol" night sponsored by Britney Spears (she wasn't there, but her brother was), batting practice with the Brooklyn Cyclones, and a talk by former Yankees pitcher Jim Bouton.

"We wanted a place where the kids could just go and have fun," says Larry Levy, president of the Twin Towers Fund and chairman of the America's Camp Foundation. "Not only have these kids lost a parent, but every single day they could not turn on the TV or open a paper without seeing a story on 9/11. They became 'The 9/11 kids.'" At America's Camp, they are all "9/11 kids," so the stigma disappears. Last summer, he said, a mother thanked him "for giving my old son back to me." Another noted that it was the first time she'd seen her son smile since the terrorist attack.

But before he said yes to the idea of the camp -- proposed by three camp directors in New England -- Levy had Camp Mah-Kee-Nac thoroughly vetted by contacting the national camp association, the local Chamber of Commerce, and Better Business Bureau. His staff called parents whose children have attended the regular sessions at Mah-Kee-Nac. "I wasn't about to put a child of a dead firefighter or police officer in harm's way," says Levy, who was Mayor Rudolph Giuliani's chief counsel.

In addition, the camp board brought in the Center for Grieving Children from Portland, Maine, to train the counselors. "We're not a grief camp, but we know when you bring together that many kids who have experienced a common loss, grief issues will bubble up," says Jay Toporoff, one of the three directors of America's Camp. "There are moments when we're a regular camp and moments when we realize what the ticket was to get here."

The regular moments abound, on the ball field, in the lake or pool, the woodshop, the dining hall. But for those other moments, when a child needs a quiet place or a sympathetic ear, there's Buddy Central. In this rustic spot overlooking the lake, there are window seats with lots of cushions and stuffed animals. There are counselors from the Center for Grieving Children. There's an art table, where kids make memory boxes to hold their dad's badge or mom's picture. Downstairs, there's the Volcano Room, where younger children, who may not be able to verbalize their feelings, can hit a punching bag, duel with Styrofoam noodles, or jump on mattresses. The camp accepts children between the ages of 7 and 15.

"We want to encourage them to express big feelings in a physical way," says Linda Kelly, the center's program director, who brought a dozen staff members with her for the week. "Some kids are open about sharing what happened to their family; others aren't. We don't encourage them to share anything they don't want to."

But many signal that they want to: They wear T-shirts bearing their father's fire company ladder number, or a piece of their mother's jewelry. Kelly has overheard them talking as soon as they hop on one of the buses that brings them to camp. "They'll say, 'Do you know how your father died? How is your family doing?' It's just a natural way of connecting."

Levy calls the subject of deceased parents "the big pink elephant no one wants to acknowledge." But it comes up constantly, in small ways. One girl who didn't like softball nonetheless showed up for practice because the last thing she did with her father was attend a ballgame. Another said

football reminded her of her dad because he was teaching her to play. It's a refrain repeated on the golf green, in the lake, and on the basketball court. One girl, whose father was a New York City firefighter, told her counselor: "My dad was a hero. Why wouldn't I want to talk about him?"

Bob Ditter, a child and family therapist in the Boston area, helps train the counselors and stays on site during the week. "There are all kinds of issues here -- a sense of loss, anger, difficulty getting to sleep, anxiety about being away from home," he says. "When a kid has experienced a sudden loss, there's a lot of anxiety over what might happen to the other parent."

One camper lost both parents on Sept. 11 -- a firefighter and a police officer. Another's father, a police officer, was killed, and his mother died from cancer three months later. Still, for all the therapists on campus, they play a muted role. "Our golden rule is, if it's not an issue, don't make it one. But if it is, don't duck it," says Ditter. Every two days, he and other professionals check in with counselors for a rundown on each child.

Parents can check on the camp website and look for their children in the hundreds of pictures posted each day; there are three full-time photographers at camp. In addition, Kodak donated 300 disposable cameras for the campers to use, and a professional photographer gave lessons.

The camp, of course, also offers a respite for the single parents -- mostly mothers -- left at home. Last year, a few of the nervous moms stayed at a nearby motel in case their children got homesick. This year, none of the mothers returned.

"They're going on vacation," Levy said with a chuckle. "They've been consumed with taking care of their children, and they have put their own needs second, third, or fourth. They have no time left for themselves. And of course, they're grieving, too."

Michelle Mathai, 13, is at the camp with her 10-year-old brother, Robert. Their father, Joe, died in the World Trade Center while there on business. Michelle has been working on a medicine cabinet for her mother, who recently had surgery. "If you want to talk about your dad here, you can," says Michelle, who lives in Arlington. "People are nice."

When the children leave tomorrow, each will be sent home with a memory video of camp. Assisted by an artist-in-residence from Atlanta, each

fashioned a square for a quilt that will be displayed in an Atlanta museum. Before they leave tomorrow, each will write a wish for the future. Last summer, one boy wrote: "To find a safe place back home so we can keep sharing and healing."