

Pennsylvania camp serves kids with attention issues

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Doug Mishkin is certain that if it weren't for Summit Camp, his family wouldn't now be figuring out where his daughter, Sarah, will be going to college in the fall.

The camp gave the 18-year-old "a sense of confidence and independence. At the end of that year, we saw tremendous leaps in growth and maturity," said her mother, Wendy Jennis.

Summit Camp, located in Pennsylvania, every summer is home to children ages 8 to 17 with a variety of diagnoses, such as attention deficit disorder, Asperger syndrome, social-skills deficits, and verbal or nonverbal learning disabilities. All have had difficulty establishing and maintaining age-appropriate peer relationships and have experienced academic, emotional and social frustration in traditional school settings.



Kids at Camp Summit ham for the camera.

"About 60 percent [of the campers] are in private schools that understand this community," said owner Allan Smith of Gainesville, Va., a Reform rabbi who directed the youth division of the Union for Reform Judaism and headed its camps and college programs.

At its founding, Summit served a small Jewish population. These days, while fewer than half of the campers are Jewish, the 40-year-old camp continues to serve kosher food and offer Shabbat morning services.

Sarah Mishkin, who attends the Lab School of Washington, said she has learning-processing problems. "I am easy to get off task. I need to be shown directions, not just told," she said. "At lectures, the words will just come in one ear and go out the other. I focus on the little things."

While these problems could add up to a miserable camping experience in a traditional setting, Summit Camp (<http://www.summitcamp.com>) has been quite the opposite for the Bethesda, Md., resident.

Sarah has spent her summer days swimming in the pool or lake, playing tennis, doing art and musical theater, and especially enjoying the camaraderie living in a bunk with girls her age. Her favorite part? “Talking till late at night.”

“It’s a place to get away from work, school and your parents. I like the whole environment,” she said. “People are all different there, so when you are at camp, they really don’t care.”

Sarah, who has attended the camp for six summers, does not believe her experiences would have been so positive if not for the staff and counselors.

“They really helped me learn more about myself. They kept pushing me to do something, even if I was afraid. They knew how to push me and gave me confidence,” she said. “The staff has that way of getting to you. They are there to make your life easier.”

Sarah’s enjoyment and success aren’t unusual, Smith said. “Our goal is to make ourselves a failure. The idea is to let them integrate socially with mainstream kids.”

He likes to think of his camp as “the magic on the hill. They are so happy they feel alive. Their sense of self-esteem just grows and grows,” he said of the campers.

Often Summit campers “don’t have friends” at school. “They are alone. Yet some of them are brilliant, simply brilliant. It’s very intense to be with them,” said Smith.

Sarah will not be returning to the camp as she prepares for college, but she is hoping to join one of its travel programs.

This summer, campers can spend three weeks going across Canada, touring Costa Rica or taking a shorter colonial American heritage trip from New York to Charleston and Atlanta. “All these things are almost one-to-one in terms of staff,” Smith said.

Mishkin’s parents attended summer camp when they were young and are so pleased that their daughter has had the same positive experiences.

“It’s an informal education. It can contribute significantly to development. We are very big fans of the camp,” Doug Mishkin said.

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