

Each year, more than six million families prepare to send their youngsters off to summer camp. A right-of-passage for many American youth, summer camp participation builds self-esteem, strengthens independence, and helps form relationships to last a lifetime. While the experience is one of mixed emotion for all parents and children as they—often for the first time—separate from each other for a significant period of time, for parents of children with special needs, the process of finding the right camp and saying goodbye for the summer (or even a camp session) can be especially trying.

Gene Bell knows how tricky this process can be for families. As Director of Summit Camp, a Pennsylvania summer camp for children with issues of attention, he spends his time walking families through the experience—from meeting prospective camper families to ensuring each child's camp session is successful. Here, he discusses the philosophy and structure responsible for what staff and parents refer to as the "magic on the hill" and offers valuable advice to parents on choosing the right camp for their youngsters.



# Magic on the Hill

Interview by Dana Puglisi

icant is the support that campers provide for one another in addition to the support that comes from the staff. For the camper, it is a virtual immersion in feeling safe, comfortable, and valued. This happens with an abundance of skilled and knowledgeable staff, a program that is clear and concise, and instruction and supervision that matches the abilities, needs and goals of our campers. We have 250 staff to supervise the maximum 300 campers that we have at a time—this ensures that every camper receives the attention and nurturing they deserve.

**EP:** What is the philosophy behind Summit Camp?

**GB:** A camp must strive to assure the health, safety and happiness of each and every child while meeting his/her basic need for acceptance, recognition and respect. For our campers, these goals are met through a program of therapeutic recreation. Our camp is the setting in which recreational, social, and educational activities have, as a primary goal, the establishment or reinforcement of feelings of success, confidence, enthusiasm, and self-worth.

The achievement of these goals requires that the activities presented be in harmony with the capabilities of the child, so that success is attainable. Our program is structured

so that the campers receive regular instruction in the widest possible variety of recreational skills and are able to judge and appreciate their own progress. At the same time, our program is flexible so that each child can pursue areas of individual interest.

Through individual guidance and the maintenance of realistic and consistent expectations, every opportunity for self-understanding, social development, the creation of friendships, and for the improvement of interpersonal living skills is tenderly nurtured.

**EP:** What is a typical day like for a child enrolled in Summit Camp?

**GB:** The day begins with wake up and cleanup time, after which we move on to breakfast. All our meals are eaten family style, as our oldest campers work as our serving staff—an opportunity for them to have responsibilities and a sense of empowerment. Then, we have activity periods that last 50 minutes and we have almost 20 areas that are either planned for the younger campers and/or chosen as electives. We have a brief wash up before lunch and then back to the cabins for a quiet rest hour. Our campers play quiet games, read, or even nap.

Campers have an opportunity to learn some

**EP:** Can you tell us a little about Summit Camp and the "magic on the hill"?

**GB:** Summit Camp offers children who would not find success in the milieu of a typical program the opportunity to enjoy a positive camp experience. Our campers, ages 8-17 for our campus and 15-18 for our travel program, represent a range of issues that are best identified as AD/HD, Asperger syndrome, Non Verbal Learning Disorder (NVLD), mild learning disabilities, and/or mild social concerns. They are bright, engaging, energetic kids who simply demand that extra support or attention in an overnight recreation setting. Quite often, our campers present a range of issues that make a camp setting difficult—from peer relations to organizational issues to the need for some sensitive supervision.

At Summit, we are quite skilled at providing praise and recognition—words of encouragement that are somewhat limited in the course of our campers' academic year. What is also signif-

## “At Summit, Jake became part of a family.”

By Staci Greenwald

great skills and share success with their bunk-mates in all of our camp programs. These activities have as their basic focus the effort to build team spirit, enhance the individual and group process, and instill individual achievement.

At the waterfront, there are activities to match every skill and interest level. Campers who master a set of skills can swim, sail, use our canoes or row boats, or even participate in a canoe trip on the nearby upper Delaware River. Some campers even participate in a “keep fit” program that has them swimming laps—some even swimming the length of our lake (a big deal—and of course, supervised by our swim staff).

Skills for life are taught and reinforced in our athletics program. Encompassing the typical range of team and individual sports, our staff provides instructional activities that are followed by game and game like sessions.

After dinner we have organized free playtime that we call “horse shoe time” and then each unit—groups of 4 cabins—have an evening activity. Once complete, the campers return to their cabins, enjoy a bedtime snack and have a directed conversation with their counselors to review the greatest hits of the day.

**EP:** What advice would you offer parents of children with special needs in choosing the right camp for their child?

**GB:** I think it is always important to look carefully and analyze the mission and direction of the camp. Equally, when speaking with camp staff it is critical to be honest about your youngster.

Parents can also learn a great deal about the camp by talking with the parents of previous campers and even getting a sense of who

Working as a special education attorney in New Jersey, I had known about Summit Camp for years. In fact, many of my clients had sent their children there, either on their own accord or because I have referred them. So when it came time to pick a special needs camp for my own child the choice was simple. I am sure I am no different than most parents in that, watching my 9-year-old son Jake get on the bus to go to sleep away camp was not easy. However, it didn't take long for me to know that I had made the right choice.

The Summit staff understood how difficult it was for me, as a parent of a child with special needs, to “let go.” Hundreds of pictures were posted daily of the children and their activities. A daily newsletter outlining the day's events and happenings was sent via e-mail. As a Summit parent, I couldn't wait for the pictures and newsletter to be posted so I could see what the campers were doing. And on the rare occasion that the pictures and newsletter weren't enough, there was always a staff member ready to take my call if I just needed to “check in.”

It was important that Jake's camp experience be a positive one. So often in the past, he was the kid who was left out or not picked for a team, or just had difficulty fitting in. Summit changed all of that. At Summit, Jake became part of a family. The child I sent to camp and the one I got back were two different kids. Jake learned that he was good at theatre, previously something he would not have tried. Now he has one of the leads in his school play!

Jake was only supposed to stay for the first session. To our surprise, we received a phone call from him asking if he could stay for the second session because “all of his friends were staying!” On visiting day, Jake introduced us to all of his friends and counselors. Everyone knew his name and cared for him. Jake even introduced us to Sadie – the therapy dog. He was more confident, more independent and happier overall. I know this summer when I kiss my son goodbye and watch him drive off on the bus to go to camp, he will be just fine, because he is going to Summit to experience the “Magic On the Hill.”

attends by looking at a list of schools the campers attend. We always encourage families to visit us the summer before they anticipate attending a camp like ours—there is nothing like seeing us in action. Basic questions about the staff, their qualifications, and staff retention rates are also important. Questions about how they deal with children and their issues are always relevant. What do they do if a child has a meltdown? How the staff are trained, and the backgrounds, ages and experience of

the front line staff and health supervision are also significant. We enjoy a sophisticated health team and nurses, as we are responsible for a great deal of medication administration. Ask about these areas as well. Is the doctor on site or just on-call, and how have they dealt with emergencies? It is also important to understand how the camp communicates during the summer with the parents. Who can call and when? We have a nightly newsletter and post almost 300 photos every night to help our families through the experience.

Camp provides so many opportunities for success—what we may call a Summit moment for our campers, their parents, and our staff. Making positive change on a regular basis is an amazing feeling that builds energy as it grows and expands, and being a part of a child's progress from the beginning of his or her time at Summit is the most rewarding feeling. •

*For more information about Summit Camp, visit [www.summitcamp.com](http://www.summitcamp.com).*

