

AWAY AT SLEEPOVER CAMP - CANOEING, ARCHERY AND S'MORES

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Dad was busy tucking dragonfly sheets around the narrow green mattress, hospital corners, nice and smooth. Then the blue fleece blanket with a dolphin design, unfurled like a sail, and finally the pillow.

On the bunk above, another dad was doing the same thing, smoothing invisible wrinkles that became visible when his thin, blond daughter clambered onto the freshly made bed.



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"You have enough to pull up over your head?" top-bunk dad asked, and she nodded.

OK, then. OK. He looked around. She was unpacked, other girls and their parents were clattering into the cabin, there was nothing left to do but the thing he'd been avoiding.

"How about we leave you?" Werner Weigt asked his 10-year-old daughter, Aimee. "You ready for us to leave you?"

She nodded, and bowed the top of her head toward him so he could kiss it, which he did. He paused again. "OK, baby, you got your hat, your sunscreen and everything else?" She nodded.

"OK, sweetie, you're all set?"

OK, then.

"Shoo," Aimee said.

It was time for sleepover camp to begin. And no place for parents. So Werner and Melinda Weigt of Loxahatchee shuffled from the cabin with several backward glances, and Aimee stuck her head over her bunk to grin down at her friend Shannon Shaughnessy, also 10.

Camp! They were officially at camp, at the Everglades Youth Conservation Camp in the J.W. Corbett Wildlife Management Area. On Seminole Pratt Whitney Road, due west of West Palm Beach, it is one of the few weeklong sleepover camps in Palm Beach County. There is a Boy Scout and a Girl Scout camp, as well as overnight camps and extended camps for special interests, but this area has never been a hotbed of general sleepaway camps. Various theories hold that this is because of the weather and the location, with beaches giving way to swamps.

So, in some ways, the Everglades Youth Conservation Camp is a throwback to *The Parent Trap* and every other sepia-toned, nostalgic memory of summer camp.

Of course, camp is as popular as it ever was, with about 12,000 day and resident camps in the United States, according to the American Camp Association. Of those, 5,000 are day camps and 7,000 are resident camps, which includes anything from overnight camp to stays of weeks at a time.

Camps have grown and specialized to include every conceivable interest, yet still there's an element of camp preserved in memory. It is an image of children walking in a row down shady, tree-lined paths, singing as they go.

Perhaps this image exists only in the gauzy world of Norman Rockwell. Perhaps you don't know the song about the baby shark. It's pretty simple: "Baby shark do dooo do doo doo doo doo, baby shark..." with thumb and index finger snapping together. Then on to mama shark, of course.

It is one of many silly songs the campers sing as they walk in groups down the camp's pathways, or sitting at the long tables before dinner, or just any time they feel like it. From mama shark, campers sing about a whole family of sharks and an unfortunate shark attack. It is surprisingly benign and fairly funny.

"We do a lot of singing here," said Alex Stevens, the camp's director. "And the kids get really into it. Sometimes, we'll get kids who come in, and you can tell they think it isn't cool to sing, but by the end of the week, they don't even care what's cool anymore, and they're singing, too."

Staff supervisor Amanda Mackintosh, 20, explains further: "It's kind of a Never Never Land out here."

The camp, originally created by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission about 40 years ago, is now part of Florida Atlantic University's Pine Jog Environmental Education Center. For eight one-week sessions during summer, children ages 8 to 14 participate in eight different programs designed to help them better understand and appreciate the environment, Stevens explained.

"A relationship with nature is so necessary, especially for children," said Chris Hill, FAU's program coordinator for the camp. He cited the term "nature-deficit disorder," coined by author Richard Louv in *Last Child in the Woods*, and with which every teenage counselor at the camp is familiar.

Which is why, when a small armadillo waddled into the lily pad-covered pond where the 11- and 12-year-old Junior Voyagers were fishing, instructor Stephanie Hemenway, 18, called them over to look.

"Awww! It looks like a little pig!" marveled Brennan Duffy, 11, of Okeechobee.

"OK, who knows one thing about armadillos?" Hemenway asked.

"They can roll into a little ball," someone offered.

"Right!" Hemenway confirmed. "And they have really bad eyesight, but they can smell really well."

The campers gazed appreciatively at the armadillo as it rustled through the long grass at the water's edge and ambled off toward the trees.

The goal, Stevens said, is to weave teachable moments into an overarching framework of fun. And safety, of course, because it is the Everglades, and alligator sightings are not uncommon, although they're generally met with thrilled squeals.

Which, ultimately, is the memorable thing about camp. There are lessons and excursions and field trips, but each week's worth of campers is just as likely to remember counselor Brad Molter, 19, hosing them down after a hike through a bog (and then offering them Jolly Ranchers for "being a man") as they are likely to remember the bog itself.

Between all the constructive activities, the arts and crafts and hikes and swims in the lake, there are moments in the air-conditioned cabins, when everyone's relaxed and just hanging out.

In Cabin 4, the girls might be reading a teen magazine called *Bop* and writing on each other with markers. In Cabin 7, they're probably playing Go Fish and eating copious amounts of candy.

And in Cabin 1:

"Did you guys know they're making a Bratz movie? I want to see it, it looks totally good."

"Guys! I want some pizza and some fries!"

"So, should I bring a notebook so I can get their, like, MySpace and stuff?"

Someone was having her hair flat-ironed. Someone else was putting on sparkly pink eye shadow. They were getting ready for the traditional Thursday-night dance, when the entire camp gathers in the dining hall to get down. Even the youngest campers, when they can pull themselves away from the candy at the concessions counter, jump up and down to *Cotton-Eyed Joe*. Wayne Selogy, 12, of Loxahatchee was an exuberant dervish, barely stopping for sips of Gatorade.

They are children, after all. Many of them are away from home for the first time. Some cried when their parents left them at the start of the week; some said they wanted to go home. Some complained about the heat and the bugs and the crushing humidity. Some got into tiffs with other campers, or didn't follow the camp rules of safety and appropriateness and respect for others.

It's never going to be perfect, not when kids are involved and not when nature is so unpredictable. But it's fun - being away from home, scarfing down hot dogs, spotting raccoons in the woods, playing cards in the mellow early evening, squealing for no reason, dreading the end of the week.

Because the end of the week always comes, when e-mail addresses are exchanged and promises made to stay in touch through the year and meet again next summer at camp.

"I'm going to miss you guys *so much*," Genevieve Cann, 14, of Sunrise, informed her Cabin 1 friends at the usual Friday-afternoon end of camp. There was a group hug, a few tears, and many photos taken.

"I'll see you back here next summer, right?"

For more information about the Everglades Youth Conservation Camp, go to www.pinejog.org/WebPages/EYCC.htm.