

# The **CAMP OAKHURST** **CHALLENGE**

[www.NYSH.org](http://www.NYSH.org)



**Fall/Winter 2011**

## **What a Summer at Oakhurst!**

Summers at Camp Oakhurst allow children and adults to create lasting memories and make new friends. Sharing the experience with others in a place that is barrier-free and adapted to a camper's needs encourages growth toward greater independence. In 2011, our 81 camp staff and 276 campers realized all of this.



In our three children's camp sessions, 174 children with physical and developmental disabilities from New York City, throughout New Jersey, Long Island, upstate New York, as well as from six other states, enjoyed a unique and enriching summer program. In addition, 62 adults with disabilities, as well as 40 children diagnosed with autism, also attended our innovative summer camp program, which includes full use of our 15 acre campus, banquets, dances, theme days, as well as daily activities including cooking, recreation, nature studies, media arts, arts/crafts, music/drama, and, of course, swimming. With more than 40 staff from Great Britain this summer, it truly was a fantastic experience for all involved!

## **Summer's Final Session: Camp Through a Different Lens**

With the first snow already behind us, summer seems far away at Camp Oakhurst. Our final summer session of 2011, designated for children diagnosed with autism, is adapted to fit the needs of these children. This summer, we served 40 children with autism over four days, a 48% increase from the same session in 2010.

The excitement and creativity these children brought to the final session was an excellent way to end the summer.



One staff member conducted a nature scavenger hunt with all of the campers over the course of their four day camp adventure. She gave each cabin a list of items to collect from the nature path along with a ziploc bag, encouraging them to find as many items as possible. The list was not itemized by name, but rather by description. For example, the list called for "something closed" as well as "something beautiful" and "something fragile."

As she collected the ziploc bags, she noticed each was more surprising than the next. Some of the bags contained spiders and worms, as well as leaves and sticks. Another bag contained only nuts, each of which could be viewed as many of the described items in one: closed, beautiful, and fragile. As she shared her story, she explained how inspiring and thought-provoking it was. These creative children had interpreted her nature scavenger hunt in a way she did not anticipate, which is exactly the kind of creativity and imagination Camp Oakhurst strives to foster in its campers.

### Summer Benefit 2011

New York Service for the Handicapped held its annual summer fund-raiser on July 9<sup>th</sup> at the home of Aimee and Steve Frankel.

This was the NYSH's sixth "Send a Kid to



*photo courtesy Lynne Ward, Two River Times*

Camp" summer party, and one of the most successful to date, raising over \$51,000. There were many new faces in attendance, all supporting a worthy cause, while enjoying a breezy summer evening with cocktails, food and good company.

Proceeds from the event go to support Camp Oakhurst's year round programs for individuals with physical and developmental disabilities.

The agency is proud of its over one hundred year heritage and wants to thank all those who attended the event and made the evening a success.

### Staff Alumni Connect

For years we have heard from former Camp Oakhurst staff how they would like to stay connected to us either through a reunion event to reacquaint with old friends and co-workers, or by helping the camp in some way through a volunteer activity. This fall we responded by sending out a staff survey, both through regular mail and Facebook.

The survey was aimed at helping us build and expand our Camp Oakhurst community. We received some very interesting and positive replies. The majority of returns came from former counselors who had worked at summer camp from 1980 through 2011, with the largest group from the last decade.

A large percentage of the alumni were still in contact with former co-workers and was up to date on events at Camp Oakhurst through the website and Facebook. Many of them currently work in the healthcare/social service fields and felt their experience at camp influenced in their academic/career choices. A majority of former staff also expressed interest in getting involved with volunteer activities and alumni social events to support Camp Oakhurst.

We will have a staff alumni social event and volunteer activity planned soon and will be in touch. Stay tuned!

### A New Camper's Story

An adorable seven year old boy diagnosed with autism, was interviewed with his mother last spring. Non-verbal, he communicates with sounds and non-verbal cues. Despite his challenges, the boy was accepted to the program and attended three respite sessions, as well as the autism session at the end of summer camp.

At Camp Oakhurst, he flourished. Staff loved him and he became attached to the counselors. He slowly began to make eye contact with counselors and flash a quick smile from time to time and counselors began to draw him out.

His mother was ecstatic with the changes she saw in him when he returned home. And he was equally happy, expressing his desire to return to camp for another session.



*The young camper (right) engaged in arts & crafts*

After one session his mother told us, “If it wasn’t for Camp Oakhurst, my son would have been placed in a facility by now. His difficult behaviors are becoming more frequent at home. When he gets there [camp] I get to relax a little and he really seems to enjoy himself because he does not do the same things there as at home.”

This young camper’s success story is just one of many we have heard from parents, whose children diagnosed with autism have been attending our weekend respites since its inception.

**Summer Camp Surveys:  
What Campers Really Think**

Once summer is over, campers and their families receive a survey in the mail giving them the opportunity to provide feedback. They

can tell us what they liked and didn't like, knowing the information is completely confidential. They also have the assurance that their responses will be considered for planning future summer camp sessions.

Categories are broken down into registration and placement, conditions of the physical plant, food service, activities and staff. There is also a section for comments and suggestions. Here’s what some of our campers and their families have to say about this year’s summer experience:

*“Thank you for a wonderful first sleep away camp experience for my son. Unfortunately my son doesn’t speak, but his smile tells me he had a good time.” – Mother of a child*



*“Outstanding! When we pulled into camp, we were welcomed by numerous counselors with open arms. Our daughter had a wonderful time and continues to speak of it.” – Mother of a child*

*“Coming to Camp Oakhurst is one of the most important and fun parts of my life. I save all year to be able to attend. Thank you for another wonderful camp experience.” - Adult*

*“I had a very enjoyable time at camp this year even though it rained a few days. I especially enjoyed all of the arts & crafts sessions. The staff were friendly and very concerned for my well being.” -Adult*

*“Jillian is a happy camper at Oakhurst. She looks forward to coming, it makes her feel*

*independent at all times. Camp staff always give me the support I need to continue to care for her after this time of rest, which we all need.”*

*- Mother of a child*

*“Oneka really enjoyed coming this year. She had a great time with the staff. This is the most excited I’ve seen her. She said the food was really good too.” - Mother of a child*

### **Sleep Away Camp is for Seniors Too!**

From September 12-15, a group of adults relived the camp experience with **JASA on the Road**, a unique retreat for seniors offering stimulating courses, lectures, and leisure activities at Camp Oakhurst. Thanks to a partnership between The Jewish Association for Services for the Aged (JASA) and Camp Oakhurst, this new service offered 22 seniors swimming, hiking, arts and crafts, as well as lectures, courses and group discussions exploring the current political landscape and opportunities to increase civic engagement, particularly among older adults.

The theme for September’s retreat was “Deconstructing the Social Contract: Politics and Purpose in Today’s Uncertain World.” Several speakers, including ones from The Nation magazine and Monmouth University, engaged clients in lively discussions. A dinner cruise on the Toms River, visits to the beach, and a guided nature walk at Poricy State Park, added to a busy retreat. Similar retreats are in the works for 2012!

### **From the Desks of the Executive Director and President**

The holiday season is upon us—a time for counting our blessings. As families served by Camp Oakhurst would be quick to tell you themselves, one of their greatest blessings is a stay at camp. It is a wonderful experience for the campers and a respite for their caregivers that would not be possible for hundreds of our

clients without donations from individuals, foundations and businesses. Each year, more and more campers benefit, as our tireless and caring staff design off-season programs for an expanding population, including the elderly, and children and young adults on the autism spectrum.

In our core summer camp program we have had greater needs this year than in the past. Our private donations have remained more or less constant, but other factors have caused us major financial concerns. With respect to our government funding, there have been a number of policy changes that have resulted in diminished financial support in 2011. One major effect of these changes is that this summer we had to provide scholarships to many campers that were not eligible for New York State funding, because their days of service are limited under the new policies. Over time, we will be able to reorient our programs to deal with these changes, but we could not make the changes in time to cover our 2011 summer costs. In 2010 we provided just over \$200,000 in scholarship funds; in 2011 we will provide well over \$300,000.

We want to emphasize that we are working very hard to deal with these developments and have great confidence that we will weather the storm and see the sunshine next year, but for now, your support is needed and appreciated even more than in the past.

As always, we are extremely grateful for all your support. We wish you and all of yours a happy and healthy holiday season and new year.

*Marilyn Friedman*  
*President*

*Robert Pacenza*  
*Executive Director*

*The Camp Oakhurst Challenge is a publication of New York Service for the Handicapped. For more information or to submit articles or commentaries, please contact: Wendy Eager, Editor, New York Service for the Handicapped, 1140 Broadway, Suite 903, NY, NY 10001, email [w.eager@nysh.org](mailto:w.eager@nysh.org) or call 212-533-2040.*