

# The CAMP OAKHURST CHALLENGE

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Summer 2012

## Camp Oakhurst: Where Friendship Can Last a Lifetime

by Wendy Eager

It has been some time since I had the opportunity to visit Camp Oakhurst, and although some things may change – new programs, building renovations, staff – one thing is a constant, the sense of family, of friendship and of belonging.



*Tim displaying some of his art*

It was a sweltering day in July when I arrived, the thermometer reading close to 100°, but that didn't stop campers from engaging in their morning activities, smiles on their faces.

During the morning, campers attended activities as part of the Prove The Potential (PTP) program, in which they set achievable goals for themselves, whether it is learning to swim or painting a rainbow.

As I walked into the auditorium, campers who had signed up for drama were practicing their curtain calls for the next day's performance of *The Lion King*. Jose, a teenage boy with an infectious smile, was experiencing his first summer at Oakhurst. His

laughter and cheerful presence filled the stage as he took a bow, the excitement contagious. After lunch I had the opportunity to speak with him and his brother, Nelson, along with a number of other children about their summer. They discussed a game of hide and seek they had the other day, laughter and smiles all around.

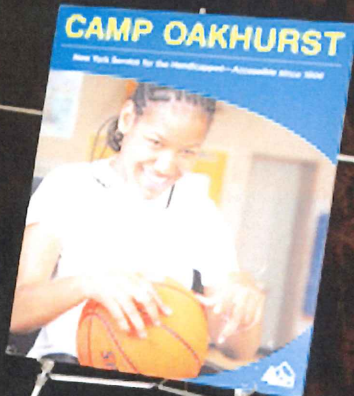
My next stop was arts and crafts, which was headed by Margo, an engaging young woman who was experiencing camp for the first time. Campers were making designs with fused beads, while others made birdhouses out of popsicle sticks. Dani, a young adult girl in a wheelchair who uses a communication device that she taps on to speak for her, expressed the desire to paint every day. Using her right arm she brushes designs onto posters, making what the group has dubbed "Dani's rainbows." Dani loves *Wicked*, and when the group made recycled bottle art, she added a black pointed hat to hers. Some of the children, like Tim and Zach, spend hours every day working on projects. Zach proudly displayed two fused bead designs that incorporated the Camp Oakhurst logo, holding them up in his wheelchair. Tim loves to weave, making baskets to give to friends. And, everyone loves to make jewelry, especially bracelets which they give to friends.

I stepped into a cooking session where they were making funnel cake, the eating part the most enjoyable. Lauren, the specialist who runs the sessions, works with adults with cerebral palsy in her native Scotland during the year, but was happy to come back to camp this summer. She says that, "last summer was one of the best of my life. I came back for the campers. You get close to them." While we were talking, Kia stopped by to remind her that she promised to help make a cake that afternoon, as they joked over previous cooking experiences.

This sense of camaraderie, of easy friendship and belonging pervaded every session I attended. Whether it was watching the kids working on a digital music album or playing bean toss in the pool, the joy permeated the space. Campers expressed it



# Spring Benefit 2012





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in their smiles, counselors told me how their time here changed their lives. Lisa, one of the swimming specialists, expressed this succinctly to me, “after working at Oakhurst, you don’t see people differently anymore. You don’t see the wheelchair, you see the person.”

The great bunch of campers who took time from their afternoon to speak with me – Jose, Raymond, Nelson, Oneka, Craig, Katrina and Brandon, all expressed similar sentiments about Oakhurst. Raymond had been attending for nine years, Jose and Nelson just one, but already they had established that bond of friendship that would have them communicating on Facebook during the year and back at camp the next summer.

Katrina had been at camp for eight years and said that from the first she had loved it. “I feel like a normal kid,” she said. “No one looks at me funny.” Raymond added, “the staff don’t treat us like we have a disability.” They all agreed it was the staff and the friends they made that had them coming back. And, after even so short a visit, I felt that I too had bridged that connection and looked forward to coming back.

*Thanks to everyone at Oakhurst for making me feel like part of their family during my visit.*

### Summer Staffing

Charles Sutherland, Camp Director, traveled to England and Poland in January to take part in Camp America’s International Job Fairs. Although he felt that recruitment was a tremendous success, the weather in Poland was a bit daunting at a chilly -18°.

The surfeit of high quality applicants this year enabled Camp Oakhurst to be fully staffed by mid-March. The language barrier which in previous years had been a problem when hiring counselors was minimal and we were able to hire counselors as well as support staff from Poland.

Our camp has a distinctive international flair this summer with staff from Northern Ireland, Scotland, Poland, England, Australia, New Zealand, Venezuela and Jordan. We have 50 international staff out of the 64 hired, including counselors, office workers, maintenance and housekeeping.

### SPRING BENEFIT

This year’s annual spring benefit, which was held on April 19<sup>th</sup>, was our most successful to date with 144 people attending and \$207,000 raised.

The evening began with cocktails and dinner at Blue Fin, followed by the performance of Tony award winner *Nice Work If You Can Get It*. We also had the opportunity to celebrate the 97<sup>th</sup> birthday of our dedicated chairman of the board, Adele Block, who has been actively on the board of directors for more than 45 years.

It was a wonderful evening and we want to thank our many loyal supporters, without whom in these difficult times we would be unable to continue to offer year-round services to adults and children with physical and developmental disabilities at our camp in Oakhurst.

We encourage our supporters to visit the camp, which runs from June 25 to August 26. Please contact Charles Sutherland at 732-531-0215 to arrange a tour. The campers always enjoy meeting new people.

### The Autism Program in Retrospect

After two years we have learned that there is an even greater need for our program for children diagnosed with autism than we initially anticipated. There is a total core of 199 children already enrolled in the program. We have grown from our original six people per session, to twelve, and in our summer session from 47 to 80, with a growing waiting list. In fact, during the year we are inundated with requests from families for placement within our program.

In response to this tremendous demand, we have added a second session week to summer camp (session 1: August 6 – 10 and session 2: August 13 – 17). Each session runs from Monday to Friday with a capacity of 40 individuals in each.

There have been significant changes to the core of the program since its inception. The focus of the program centers on three key ingredients: recreation, socialization and peer interaction. Once an

individual has been accepted to the program, we assess their specific needs and set goals for them that are both personal and achievable. We do this even if the stay is as short as one weekend.

We particularly focus on activities that involve sensory perception, such as touch, eye contact, and motion. The activities are more intensive than our regular sessions, with more supervisory involvement.

The program is also more family-oriented, with parents taking an active role. Due to the intensive care needs of this group, parents tend to spend more time interacting with staff before dropping their children off at Camp Oakhurst. After each session, a detailed day-by-day report is prepared for the family, which gives information on what activities their child participated in, as well as any behavioral issues they may have had.

Due to the program's success we have not needed to engage in major outreach, relying primarily on word of mouth, as well as attending some camp and provider fairs.



*First night of summer session 2011*

This past year, the ACA (American Camp Association) nominated Camp Oakhurst for its national Eleanor P. Fels Award in recognition of the camp and respite care we provide to families with a child diagnosed with autism. We are very proud of our success.

## **EMERGENCY RESPITE**

An emergency respite program was reinstated six months ago, after Charles Sutherland and Lori Schenck attended a NJ - DDD (Department of Developmental Disabilities) meeting in which the very real need for emergency respite was addressed. There are many struggling families who have a relative with disabilities that require immediate help. This is especially true for those family members who are trying to hold down a job while caring for an adult or child with physical or developmental disabilities. There are very few places that offer the type of service that includes not only shelter, but programs with therapeutic value, recreation and socialization.

Since then, four individuals have utilized this much needed service. For one woman, who was struggling through a difficult divorce while caring for her child with autism, emergency respite was a true lifeline. She was so grateful for our care that she asked if we would consider her for the following month. We had another case in which a young woman with cerebral palsy was struggling to negotiate living in a homeless shelter. Again, Camp Oakhurst was able to provide her with respite care, and she remained in residence for several weeks. But there are still many more people who need such care, and we are attempting to fill part of that need.

If you are interested in further information regarding this program or know someone who needs immediate care, please contact Charles Sutherland at our facility in New Jersey.

## **FROM THE DESK OF THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR AND PRESIDENT**

People ask us at Camp Oakhurst: "How do you do it...how do you maintain 15 buildings on 15 acres and offer services year-round to hundreds of children and adults with disabilities, and do so striving to serve all who seek services, regardless of ability to pay?"

Well, it is not easy, but we have been doing it for 107 years. This past year alone, we provided 772 total clients visits over 5,552 days of overnight service! Of these, we offered 31 days of service and



144 young adults attended our autism program. For all our overnight services, for camp and respite, on average each of our clients stayed at Camp Oakhurst a little more than 18 nights a year over 2-3 different visits with us. And, our day recreation program was open over 100 days this past year, with over 582 daily visits in this program serving local adults with disabilities from Monmouth County, NJ.

The fees we charge our clients average around \$135 a day for our overnight programs, which is far below our real average cost per client per overnight stay of \$317 per day. Even with this subsidized fee, we still provided over \$300,000 in scholarships last year alone to 65% of our clients, with each one receiving an average financial assistance of \$1,538 a year. That also means 25% of our clients come to our camp and respites paid fully by the government with only 10% paying our full, subsidized fees.

In fact, with some funders cutting our budgets, and with government agencies tightening client eligibility criteria, the support of charitable donations is more important than ever.

This past year we have made many improvements at the camp, including:

Extensively renovating our Pines Cabin and replaced 11 court-yard windows, completely rebuilt both screened porches on either end of the cabin, and completely replaced all the sleeping quarter floors and reinforced those below the bathroom.

Replacing all 42 windows on the main floor of our Main House building, allowing for cooler summers and warmer winters, and savings in utility costs.

Replacing the Elms Building ceiling-mounted recreation hall projector and presentation system for trainings and dvd/internet streamed films.

Renovating the second floor Main House bathroom, a complete renovation of floors, walls, multiple toilets, sinks, and showers.

In June we purchased our second camp bus, allowing us to eliminate expensive outside ambulette services and allowing us to transport clients all on the same day, and not stagger summer camp arrival and departure days.

We continue to need your generous donations and appreciate any help you can provide us in identifying sources of funding for scholarships, capital projects and equipment purchases.

### WISH LIST

Our current wish list of equipment, supplies and property repairs/improvements needed for Camp Oakhurst follows. Please look over it and consider making a donation or helping us to secure underwriting or an in-kind donation to help these wishes come true.

Telescope for stargazing in nature program  
Arts and crafts supplies  
Office supplies  
Cleaning supplies  
Shrubs for planting  
Raised garden beds  
New bed linens for twin-size beds  
New/gently-used bed rails  
New pool life jackets  
New sports equipment (balls, nets)  
New/gently-used exercise equipment  
New cabin beds for staff  
New dining room tables and chairs  
New/gently-used furniture for cabin porches  
New shower chairs  
Sidewalk lighting  
Golf cart or cargo ATV for inter-camp use  
Wheelchair-accessible gazebo  
Renovated teaching /activity barrier-free kitchen  
Wood fencing around entire roadside property  
New roof for Infirmary building  
Re-paving of the Camp Oakhurst parking lot  
Re-paving of sidewalks  
Underwriting for year-round housekeeper

Thanks so much for your interest and continued support.

*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 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 212-533-4020.*