

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

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



**Spring 2014**

## **Oakhurst's Summer Camp Means So Much To So Many**

Each year as camp ends its summer sessions, and the children and adults who attend return to their homes and residences and begin making preparations for the new school year, we send out surveys to all our clients. These surveys ask questions which cover every aspect of their summer experience: from the physical condition of the campus to the range of activities to food service and staff. Campers and their families are asked to write comments that help us to learn what works and does not work, and each year this helps us to make Oakhurst an even better place.



Statistically, the figures tend to be the same – everyone loves the staff, especially the counselors. Swimming and athletics rank high on the activity scorecard. And the food can always use some improvement. The things that stand out, however, are the comments, which tell the story of how much Camp Oakhurst means in the lives of those who spend a one, two, four or six week session there – often returning year after year.

Their comments tell of the joy of reuniting with friends they only see while at Oakhurst or through the virtual reality that is Facebook or Twitter. For caregivers it is the relief of knowing they can have a quiet moment or take that long dreamed of vacation without worrying about their family member.

A visit during a hot summer day is a window into that world -- hearing the campers shouting as they swim in their inflatable tubes while playing a game in the pool, or reciting lines while rehearsing a scene they will perform later to an audience of their friends. Lunchtime is when you get to meet everyone, the decibel level rising as meals are noisily eaten, jokes made and the camaraderie apparent.

For those who haven't had the experience of being there, of seeing the campers in their home away from home, reading some of the comments made by caregivers after their family member returns home can provide a tiny glimpse into that private joy.

For Nicholas, who attended both summer autism sessions, it was his first time and his family expressed that he "was really excited about the kindness and enthusiasm of the counselors." Tanja, a young adult who is both deaf and non-verbal, attended her first session this past summer. Her mother wrote, "she loved it and is excited to come back next year. She loved all the staff that worked with her." And then there is Tyler, who also enjoyed his first camp experience during one of the autism sessions. His mother appreciated the summer camp journal which she said, "helped him to remember his week and to tell me about it once he arrived home."

Whether the campers are verbal, or write their

comments on a communication device, they return home expressing their love of the staff, the activities they attended and the desire to return as soon as they are able. For some next year is too long, and they apply to come to the respite sessions during the non-summer months.

With spring just around the corner, there is a growing excitement as campers are re-applying, knowing that summer camp is just a few months away.

### **The Importance Of Emergency Respite**

Camp Oakhurst's emergency respite program, which was initiated in 2012 through requests from the states of New York and New Jersey, continues to serve families on an emergency basis. The program was designed to provide respite services beyond our scheduled sessions, and has helped families during times of surgical recovery or while family members are waiting placement in a more permanent facility. The vast majority of our referrals come to us through either New Jersey's Division of Developmental Disabilities (DDD) or New York State's Office of People with Developmental Disabilities (OPWDD).

Since its incorporation into our program, it has become increasingly more apparent how dire the need is for these services. In 2013 alone, the camp was able to provide emergency respite for 18 individuals, many for long periods of time while they awaited a more permanent placement.

One such individual was Kyle, a 16 year old from New Jersey diagnosed with autism. Kyle's parents were searching for a permanent placement within a facility that would meet both his behavioral and social needs. In addition, he also needed a facility that could accommodate his strict dietary regimen, which was due primarily to his lengthy list of allergies.

Due to the effects of his emotional disability, the family spent the holidays in an emergency room, as no other place would take him. The agency was contacted by DDD and he was placed in our

emergency respite program the day after Christmas.

Kyle responded well to the activities at camp. He particularly enjoyed playing with toy cars and going to different program activities. Music and dance quickly became his favorites. During a game of musical chairs, Kyle joined in with the other campers, and when he wasn't participating, watched from the side lines dancing and cheering the others on.

During his stay, Kyle's parents visited him on a regular basis and were thrilled to see how much he enjoyed the activities in respite. His father expressed to us how much this program meant for both Kyle and the family. He added that they had many less worries just knowing that he was safe at camp. In early February Kyle was placed in a permanent residence in Pennsylvania.



*Kyle (on right) engaged in a game of musical chairs*

Dante, a 21 year old young adult male from the Bronx diagnosed with autism, came to the camp in the fall of 2013 while his mother was undergoing knee replacement surgery. Dante's other family members live out of state, and his mother was unable to find a facility that would take him while she underwent surgery and rehabilitation. Dante stayed at camp through the four week period of her recovery in a rehab facility.

During his stay, Dante took part in several different program activities. He was particularly engaged when doing any activity involving

paper, or when dancing or jumping around. The counselors and campers enjoyed giving him assistance with his recitation of numbers, colors and select vocabulary words that he liked to use. This repetition was very order specific and was repeated daily. When the counselors learned the order and could recite it with him, he was thrilled.

Dante's bout of homesickness was alleviated by frequent communication through Facetime with his mother during her convalescence. During his short stay, Dante made a lasting impression on our staff and campers. His family was grateful that we were able to assist them in their time of need.

The emergency respite program continues to be a lifeline for many others, like Kyle and Dante. It enables them to find some security and a safe haven until a more permanent option can be found.

### Summer Staff

*Camp Director, Charles Sutherland, describes his summer 2014 staff recruitment experience:*

Each year Camp America offers recruitment trips overseas to agencies that are looking to hire summer staff for their camps, such as ours. The chance to hire staff from abroad gives camp directors a unique opportunity to visit places that are culturally different from their own here in the United States, and can prove to be an interesting and exciting experience. This year, while browsing the list of camp fairs offered in their recruitment package, my eye came across Amman, Jordan, in the Middle East, a place where a recent summer staff member had come from. This is a location I had never dreamed of actually visiting, but was intrigued to see.

For three days in Jordan, while interviewing potential staff, I was exposed to an exciting and uniquely different culture, both getting to know and learn from people whose life experiences were far removed from my own, and at the same time having the opportunity to walk among the ancient ruins, such as the Temple of Hercules. It

was an experience I won't soon forget. I strongly recommend that anyone considering a trip abroad step out of their comfort zone and travel to a destination such as Jordan.



*Charles Sutherland with returning staff in Manchester*

In addition to being exposed to a new and different culture, I also went to the more traditional recruitment fairs in Edinburgh, Manchester and London, where we have hired many staff in previous years. Each area has its own unique beauty as well as amazing applicants who actually search for us at the camp fair. They are all eager to work with us in the summer of 2014. An added bonus was that at each of the fairs in the UK, I was greeted by former staff, who also wished to return and help with my recruitment.

This is the real crux of this story – how so many people who work at Oakhurst are touched by their experience of being a counselor for the summer and want to not only return, but include and share this experience with others. The trip itself, in addition to the experiences previously mentioned, was a huge success and we hired the most amazing staff to be part of our team this summer. I know our current staff and campers will enjoy the additions to the Oakhurst family.

### New Improvements – Twin Industries

It was during the annual Summer Party to benefit Camp Oakhurst, held at the home of Tim and Jane Orr in July 2013, that William McDaid from Twin Industries, a full service landscaping and

horticulture business, expressed an interest in visiting the camp to see if there was anything he could do to help.

Within two days, he visited the camp and Charles Sutherland, our camp director, gave him a tour of the buildings and grounds. During his visit he noticed the absence of air conditioning in the cabins and offered to purchase and install portable air conditioners in all the camper bunk rooms. Thanks to this generous donation, for the rest of the summer, especially on those hot and humid evenings, campers and counselors welcomed the relief this gift provided for them.

At the end of summer after the sessions were over, Mr. McDaid and Twin Industries returned to regrade and landscape the campsite, fire pit and nature trails in the Oakhurst woods. This was a much needed improvement, especially after the damage done the previous year as a result of Superstorm Sandy. When campers return this summer, they will enjoy the benefits of this much needed makeover.

### **What Lies Ahead For Camp Oakhurst**

The agency officially kicked off the strategic planning process in January 2014. To assist us in the process, we engaged a team of consultants with extensive experience working with nonprofit organizations, government agencies and foundations.

In February and March, the consultants hired by Camp Oakhurst are conducting several focus groups (client caregivers, community supporters, and our direct care staff) as well as interviewing two dozen important individuals, including key members of our board of directors and major donors, colleagues from other agencies in similar program areas, policymakers, funding partners, and other experts.

At the kick-off meeting in late January, the consultants presented initial findings from a variety of internal interviews and assessments, as well as a review of NYSH/Camp Oakhurst documents, reports and materials.

Based on these sources and our consultants' understanding of successful nonprofit strategy, the following questions were approved as the greatest priority to explore: What is the target population for NYSH/Camp Oakhurst's programs and services (both year-round and summer camp)? What does success look like for the agency? How can the agency develop potential future leaders on its board of directors? What revenue generation model can best sustain Camp Oakhurst? How does NYSH/Camp Oakhurst want to brand its organization and the services it provides?

Once the focus groups and interviews are completed by the end of March, we will work to build a new vision, or reconfirm the present one. We will construct a set of assumptions about how to ensure that the agency has the capacity to develop resources (both human and financial). We will then test those assumptions with the planning committee, and use that information to engage senior staff to draft the plan, which the planning committee and staff will present to the full board of directors in June.

There are many challenges facing Camp Oakhurst, from a client population with increasingly more profound disabilities, to the emergence of autism as a significant disability, to new limitations in government funding and the availability of private donations. This planning process is critical to help meet these challenges and help ensure a viable and more effective Camp Oakhurst. We are grateful to everyone involved in this intensive planning process, and look forward to reporting the results.

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*The Camp Oakhurst Challenge is a publication of New York Service for the Handicapped. For more information 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.*