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Why do they love camp? Campers-turned-counselors count the ways

By Andrea Waxman
of *The Chronicle* staff

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When the spring term at colleges and universities across the country ends, and Wisconsin days finally grow long and warm, many college students and recent graduates return to the camps of their childhoods to work as counselors.

What is it that pulls them back, year after year to the woods and the lakes, so far from the fast moving, wired world they inhabit the rest of the year? The Chronicle posed this question to longtime campers-turned-counselors at several Jewish camps in Wisconsin this week, and here are some of their thoughts on the magnetism of camp.



Andrew Lieb (center) plays guitar at Camp Interlaken.

"I wait to go. I go every year and I can't wait to go back," said Andrew Lieb, about the Steve & Shari Sadek Family Camp Interlaken JCC, in Eagle River, where he has spent at least part of every summer since he was 9 years old.

Leib, now 19, grew up in Fox Point, graduated from Nicolet High School in 2007 and just completed his freshman year at Philadelphia's Drexel University where he plans to major in entertainment and arts management. Back in the beginning, he wanted to go to camp because his older sister and brother were going, as were "a bunch of [his] friends," he said in a telephone interview.

In addition to the fact that for "a lot of years [his] best friends were all up at camp," Leib loved the simplicity of life there, where he left behind the electronic stimulants—the video games, cell phone, computer — that were so much a part of his life, and "[went] with what camp had to offer."

He described it as "secluded, in the middle of nowhere [and] the best place on earth. It was a petrie dish of fun."

Camp Interlaken had just the right amount of Jewish content, according to Leib. It was, he said, an extension of what he was exposed to at the Milwaukee Jewish Day School.

"Easily one of my favorite [things at camp] is Shabbat" and especially Havdalah" [the service that marks the end of Shabbat], he said. On Saturday night, campers and staff gather on the shore of Lake Finley for song and prayer as the sun sinks below the horizon and the sky glows with color above the pristine north woods.

"When you come home from camp and try to explain [the camp experience to others] you can't," he said. You just can't convey the *ruach* (spirit).

For Leib, camp got better every year, he said, and part of that is because of his counselors. "[Former Milwaukeeans] Joey Barnett and Joel Rozansky were our

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counselors for three years in a row. They stayed with us because they liked us so much and that was unheard of," Leib said.

Rozansky, especially, was his role model, he said. "I wanted to [be a] song lead[er] and play guitar and be a counselor because Joel was," he said.

And Leib remembers Barnett telling him, "It's one thing to experience the magic [of camp], but it's way better to make the magic," Leib said.

"I have had eight, nine, 10 years of camp; I rode the ride to the fullest and it's time for me to give back. If campers didn't come back as counselors, there wouldn't be any camp," said Leib, who will leave for Interlaken's second session on July 16.

Giving back

Each of the five young adults interviewed for this story mentioned giving back to younger campers as a motivation.

Noah Gallagher, 31, director of Camp Young Judaea-Midwest in Waupaca, Wis., said he can't pay his counselors very much and when interviewing, he always asks prospective counselors — most of whom were CYJ campers — why they want to come back.



Lauren Gross and Noah Gallagher

"The overwhelming majority says it's because they feel like the camp gave them an experience that they want to give back [to other kids.]" The experience of working as counselors gives these young people a rare opportunity to be strong, positive Jewish role models, Gallagher said.

Native Chicagoan Gallagher first came to CYJ in 1988, at age 11. He spent many summers as a camper and then counselor. After graduating from the University of Wisconsin-Madison with a degree in philosophy and Hebrew studies, he became the assistant director of Young Judaea's National Senior Leadership camp, Camp Tel Yehudah, in Barryville, N.Y. Recently, he returned to CYJ Midwest as director.

In January 2009, he will marry fellow camper Lauren Gross, who is three years his junior. She grew up in Ann Arbor, Mich., and met Gallagher when she began attending CYJ in 1991.

Gallagher said he made friends from all over the U.S. at CYJ. "These were the people I bonded with more than I had bonded with anyone else in my life." And that happened in just three weeks, Gallagher said.

That kind of special camp connection develops, Gallagher said, because the kids are away from home, some for the first time, and the experience of overcoming challenges together binds them into a group.

Another positive result for Gallagher, who attended public schools, he said, was that CYJ's "completely Jewish environment established his Jewish identity" in a strong way.

Learning to love

Not all of the counselors interviewed fell in love with camp immediately, when they first went as children.

Brian Avner, 22, remembers his parents having to persuade him to return to camp for a second year when he was nine years old.

That year, he said, "I made friends with eight or nine people I was really close with and we were in the same cabin for the next four years. The friends I made that summer were my best friends through the end of high school."



Brian Avner

In all, he spent seven years as a camper at the Olin-Sang-Ruby Union Institute camp, of the Union of Reform Judaism, in Oconomowoc. Since then, he spent a year in the

camp's study and work program, Avodah, and is now in his fifth year as a counselor.

Avner, who grew up in Deerfield, Ill., graduated in May 2007 from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, where he majored in Hebrew studies, Jewish studies and religious studies. He worked as a Hebrew and religious school teacher and youth advisor in several Reform synagogues in the Chicago suburbs last year.



Rachel Kaplan

Rachel Kaplan, born and raised in Buffalo Grove, Ill., started as a camper at OSRUI the summer before seventh-grade.

"From a seventh-grade perspective, everything that could go wrong did," Kaplan said. No one wanted to bunk with her because the other campers all knew each other, she didn't like the food and "it might even have been raining."

But the first evening, at prayer services, the beautiful music comforted her and, she said, "It showed me that I had a bond with everyone there — I realized we all had something in common."

Kaplan has been a committed camper and then counselor ever since. Before her last two years of high school, she attended the URJ's Kutz Camp in New York for young leadership development. After her freshman year in college she returned to OSRUI as a counselor-in-training and this is her fifth year as staff.

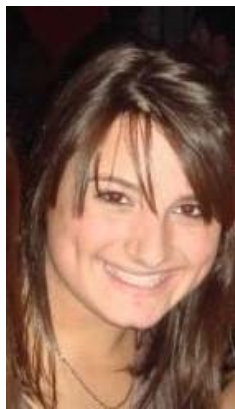
'Crazy and free'

Not only did Kaplan want to spend the summer in a place that is special to her, she also wanted to facilitate making that experience special to others.

"There's so much that I love about [OSRUI]. It's all about the personal interactions, about being with the kids and, in some ways, being a kid yourself."

After spending two semesters in Israel — one during high school and one in college — Kaplan graduated from Indiana University in May with a degree in Jewish studies and minors in history, religious studies and Hebrew.

She has been accepted to rabbinical school at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute for Religion, but will defer entering for a year, partly so that she could return to camp one last time, she said. She plans to work at the American Conference of Cantors in Schaumburg, Ill., next year.



Emily Albus

Emily Albus, 20, also a native of Buffalo Grove, started as a camper at B'nai B'rith Beber Camp in Mukwonago at age 9, before entering fifth-grade. Now a senior majoring in art education at UW-Madison, she is spending her 12th summer at Beber Camp.

Albus, who said she has felt some pressure to pursue internships rather than return to camp, now realizes that she wants to become a teacher and that camp is a great place to prepare for that career.

One of the directors of Beber's Pioneer program, the first of a two-year leadership training program, Albus is working with 16-year-old campers.

"In Pioneers we do a lot of teambuilding, leadership [skill] training, some program planning for younger campers and a service project in which we make something to give back to

the camp," she said.

Albus said her Pioneer year was important in shaping who she is today and she wants to participate in giving that experience to her campers.

She said she believes kids who go to camp every year learn to work together and accept others. Through living in close contact with a cabin full of their peers, they learn social and cooperative skills, as well as tolerance for each other's differences.

One of the most important duties of counselors, one for which they receive special training, is to be aware of bullying behavior, Albus said. We try to do a lot to promote acceptance among the campers."

Kids love to go to camp, Albus believes because unlike at school where there is pressure to do everything right, at camp the counselors show by example that it's alright to be "crazy and free. When you're a camper, you think the counselors are the coolest people

in the world.”

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