

FAMILY VALUES

Camp it up

Gay and lesbian families find solace and summer fun through YWCA camping program

by Inga Sorensen

Everyone needs a refuge. "Isn't *that* the truth," says Miriam Callaghan, director of Camp Westwind, a scenic and secluded camp situated on the Oregon Coast.

The camp, which is owned and operated by the YWCA of Portland, is the site of the third annual Family CampOUT slated for July 20-23.

"I think for a lot of gay and lesbian families there is a pervasive feeling of isolation. This is an opportunity—and in many cases the *only* opportunity—for families to really relax and be totally out. And it's a chance for them to make friendships that carry on throughout the year," she says.

According to Callaghan, the YWCA decided to sponsor a camping experience for lesbians and gay men with children in the wake of the highly explosive campaign over Ballot Measure 9 in 1992.

"The climate then was so intense, and I think it was extremely difficult on gay and lesbian families. There really was no place for them to come together for a safe and pleasant family experience," she says. "The climate has changed a bit over the past few years, but Family CampOUT still is one of the few places where these folks don't have to fight to be a family. They can just be who they are."

Family CampOUT activities resemble those offered at summer camps nationwide. Kids hike, ride horses, make crafts, play games, and sing around the camp fire.

"We do all your basic camping stuff," says Callaghan. "Although last year some of the parents got together to talk about how they became families. Some had partners who brought a child with them into the relationship. We had one set of parents that included two women and a father. What left a mark on me was that these folks really thought long and hard about their families. It wasn't something that just happened."



PHOTO BY BONNIE TINKER

Bonnie Tinker, a Family CampOUT participant and chair of Love Makes a Family Inc., a Portland-based organization that promotes the rights and visibility of gay and lesbian families, has in the past shuffled in a set of "teen helpers" to assist with various camp duties.

Tinker says that some of the teens are the children of gay and lesbian parents, some of whom are meeting other young people with gay and lesbian parents for the first time. Other teen helpers are gay and lesbian youth.

"I think it's terrific for them to be in an environment where they can see gay and lesbian adults with their children—where they can watch gay and lesbian families interacting," she says. "Perhaps it provides them with a model and vision of what they can be and do when they get older."

Tinker adds: "At the same time, the lesbian and gay parents are delighted to see these active and open young people. It really is a rejuvenating experience for everyone."

An estimated 45 people participated in Family CampOUT during each of the first two years. Callaghan would like to see that number reach 60 to 75 this summer.

She adds that public reaction to the camp has generally been positive.

"I think during that first year we received one angry letter and one phone call," she says. "I was also recently at a Summer Camp Fair in Beaverton. Occasionally someone would pick up a brochure about Family CampOUT and there would be a little eye-rolling, which actually kind of surprised me, but other than that response has been great."

The cost for Family CampOUT is \$175 per adult, \$115 for children ages 7 to 12, and \$80 for those ages 3 to 6. Financial support may be available. To register or receive further information, call (503) 294-7474.

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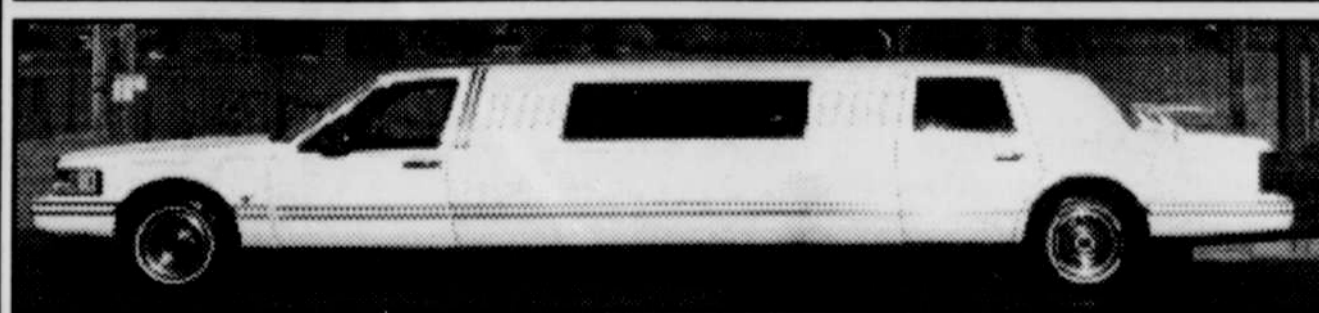
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