

CULTURE

Pass the s'mores

Gay and lesbian families are invited to camp out this summer

BY TOM STEVENSON

For decades upon decades, the YWCA has been in the business of working against discrimination of all kinds. In fact, the organization's desire to make sure people are free to be who they are has been a centerpiece of its work since its inception.

So it's not surprising that the YWCA is sponsoring a special summer camp for gay men and lesbians and their children. Family CampOUT will be held Aug. 10 to 13 at Camp Westwind on the Oregon coast.

Jean DeMaster, Greater Portland YWCA executive director, says the organization recognized the need for gay and lesbian parents and their children to have a safe place to camp and designed something to meet that need.

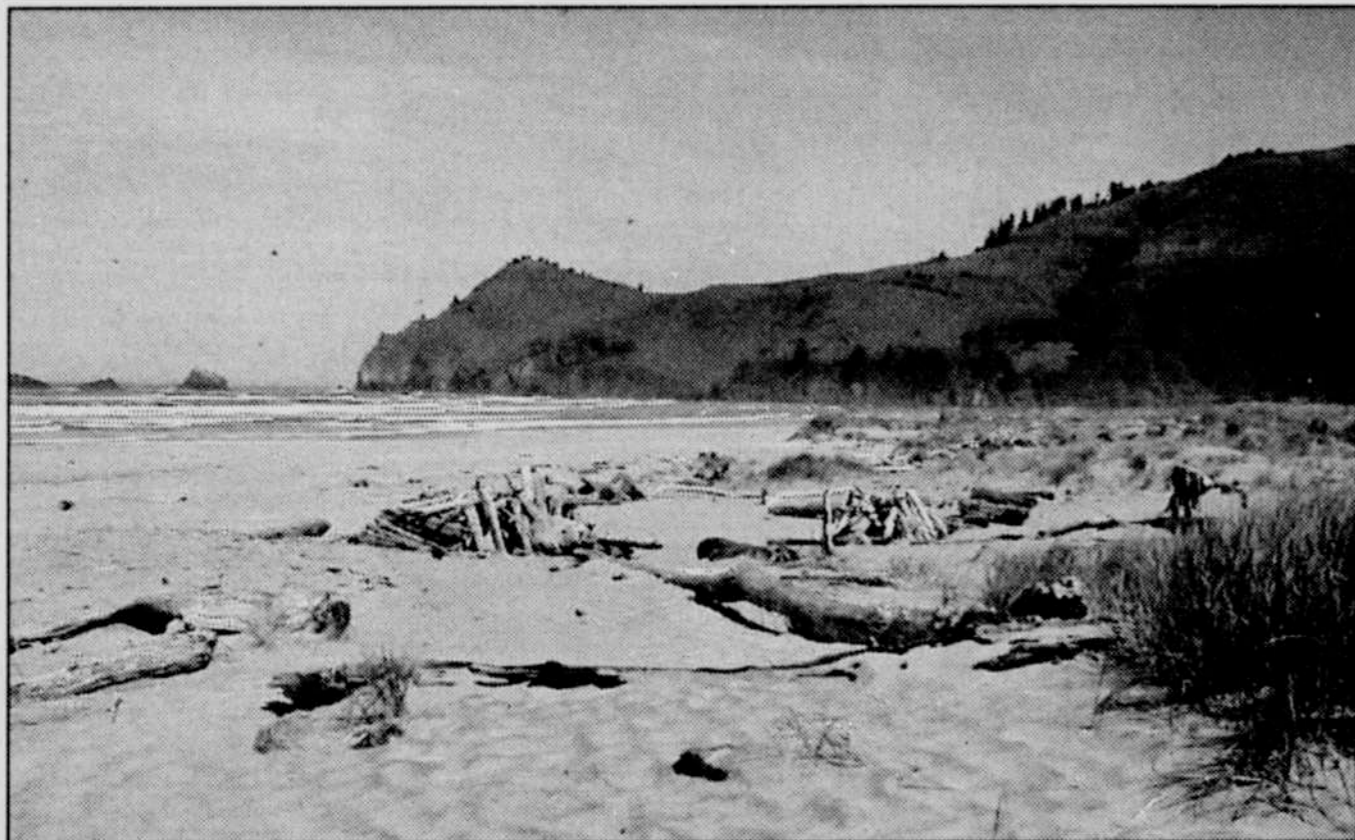
"It is a totally safe camp," she assures. "It offers gay and lesbian parents and their children an opportunity to get away from the city and pay attention to each other. They do not

provide them with not only an opportunity to talk about it but also to spend quality time with other kids in the same situation. They are in a situation where they can see the positive aspects of their families. And for a little bit of time they won't have to deal with jokes about gays."

As DeMaster notes, the middle school years are sometimes a difficult time for children to deal with their parents, and what the camp reinforces is that all families are treasures.

The YWCA operates camps for children and families at Westwind on almost a year-round basis. The organization offers specialty events such as science camp for girls and leadership training for teens, as well as the traditional summer camp experience.

DeMaster adds that most of the camps fill up each year, but the organization has found it difficult to get a large attendance at Family



What's not to like? The perfect beach at Camp Westwind

always have a chance to do that. And we make sure they have nothing to worry about, like they might at other public camping spaces."

The camp is run just like the YWCA's other family camps. Folks can "leave the dishes and laundry at home," go to the beach and enjoy each other's company.

According to information provided by the organization, "a caring staff of volunteers will provide a program of family, adult and child activities." The camp will offer "opportunities to hike, sing by a campfire, create treasures at the craft house, wade in the ocean and enjoy the beauty of Westwind."

And Westwind is certainly beautiful. It is undergoing a \$4 million renovation; already, a new shower/bathhouse has been constructed, and the main building has been partially remodeled.

The camp is located south of Tillamook and north of Lincoln City. It encompasses a 500-acre site on the pristine and scenic Salmon River Estuary.

Although the beauty of Westwind is one of the strongest attractions, those interested in Family CampOUT cite another special facet. As DeMaster notes, children of gay and lesbian parents, especially teen-agers, have some unique fears and concerns. The camp works to overcome those.

"Those can be really hard times for the children of gay parents," DeMaster explains. "We

CampOUT. Part of the problem, she says, is that a lot of gay and lesbian parents don't realize it exists. She said the organization definitely hopes to change that, and she wants families to know they will find a welcoming and safe environment.

The fee for the four-day camp, which includes meals and activities, is \$195 for adults, \$130 for youth between 7 and 12 and \$90 for children between 3 and 6. However, DeMaster is quick to point out that money should not be the determining factor in whether a family attends. Scholarships always are available for those who cannot afford the camp.

DeMaster also mentions that the YWCA has had a "strong commitment to overcoming discrimination for all people." That means all of its services are open to all people, including those who are gay.

The YWCA offers a number of services ranging from housing to domestic violence shelters. The organization offers health and fitness activities and services for the elderly. The list is endless. And, as DeMaster emphasizes, all are open to gay and lesbian residents and their families. ■

For more information about FAMILY CAMPOUT call 503-294-7476 or 503-294-7486.

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