

CULTURE

Happy campers

CampOUT redefines quality time for queer families

BY JODI HELMER

Going to summer camp has become a ritual for Karen Thomas and her children, Casey and Jenni, who have spent the past 10 summers taking nature hikes, participating in talent shows and doing arts and crafts as a family.

"Camp is a really special time," Thomas says. "Every year it becomes more and more of a home to us."

Thomas and her children are among the growing number of families who have discovered CampOUT, a four-day camp every August for queer families run by the YWCA of Greater Portland.

"I have always thought kids needed to know other families with gay and lesbian parents," says Thomas. "At camp, all of the kids are from families with gay and lesbian parents; the interactions my kids have are really positive."

CampOUT is situated on the banks of the Salmon River at picturesque Camp Westwind, a 500-acre site surrounded by nature on the Oregon coast. Now in its 11th summer, it offers queer families the opportunity to participate in recreational activities, relaxation and community building in a safe, supportive and engaging environment.

"It's really important for everyone to have a place where they can be 100 percent who they are," says Kim Summers, director of Camp Westwind. "CampOUT is a safe environment where families can just be families. There are a lot of times kids feel like they are the only ones, but here, kids have the realization that there are a lot of families just like theirs."

More than 60 campers attended last year—a 30 percent increase over 2002—and 75 campers are expected in August. Though most of the families are from the Portland area, CampOUT has attracted some from as far away as Vermont and Alaska.

Rates, which range from \$115 to \$210, include lodging, meals and activities for the four-day session. Prospective campers who cannot afford the program fee are encouraged to research various scholarship options available through the YWCA.

"One thing that stops a lot of people from signing up is the cost," says Summers. "But we have a lot of scholarships available; 40 percent of our families are receiving reduced rates."

Days spent canoeing, horseback riding, doing arts and crafts, hiking and hanging out on the beach and nights making s'mores



Karen Thomas (left) and her two kids have been enjoying Camp Westwind every summer for 10 years

around the campfire are part of the appeal, but the opportunity to spend quality time together and be part of a supportive community are the true reasons families return to CampOUT.

"Everyone is so friendly and nurturing at Camp Westwind,"

Thomas says. "Spending time together here is different than going out to dinner, seeing a movie or doing yardwork. Here we spend real quality time together."

Summers says many families welcome the respite from the real

—David Colton

world. "Camp Westwind is a place where families can play and have a great time without worrying about the phone ringing or having to make dinner. The land is magical; when people are at Westwind, they feel like they are at home within themselves."

Though CampOUT focuses on spending quality time as a family, counselors understand that parents need a bit of a break from the hustle and bustle of daily activities. Every morning counselors engage children in activities, leaving parents to enjoy a quiet cup of coffee, stroll along the beach and just relax.

"Those morning hours are a time to escape in absolute paradise," Thomas says. "I love the feeling of knowing that for two or three hours I can do anything I want."

David Colton has been going to CampOUT with his daughter, Erin, for the past 10 summers.

"It is absolutely a little piece of heaven in my life," he smiles.

Colton says the secluded setting, the wonderful people and the opportunity to spend vacation time with his daughter have drawn him back year after year. "It truly is a respite from the real world," he offers. "There is no connection to the pressures of everyday life; it is time to completely unwind."

CampOUT also gives Colton a chance to reconnect with old friends. "All kinds of campers come to Camp Westwind, and everyone is truly welcomed," he says. "I really enjoy reconnecting with the people that I may not see more than once a year."

And when all the campers gather together, there is no telling what they may do. Talent shows, water fights and rolling around in the mud are just a few of the things that might break out at CampOUT.

"There is a good, solid group of people that have been coming to Camp Westwind for 10 years," says Summers, referring to Thomas, Colton and a handful of other campers who return every summer. "It is very much their community."

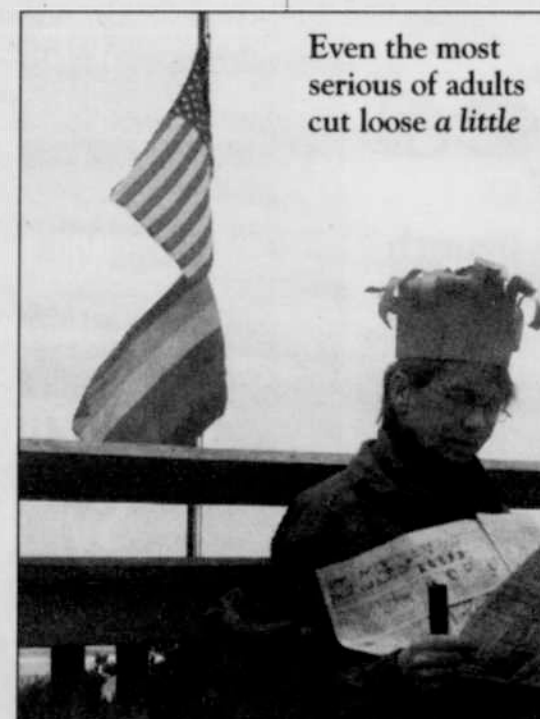
As an organization that promotes diversity, tolerance and equality, the YWCA believes CampOUT is an important program for the community. "We want to be able to provide something...that isn't available anywhere else," says Summers. "People really do build a community at CampOUT."

Colton adds: "Adults don't get nurtured very often because we are so busy taking care of everyone else. But Camp Westwind is a culture of kindness and caring where adults truly feel nurtured."

And the kids seem to enjoy it, too.

"The tradition has become really important to Erin," Colton says. "We both love singing and the talent show and the games, and [the counselors] engage the kids so well."

Even the most serious of adults cut loose a little



Even though Casey and Jenni are now 19 and 17, Thomas says they still look forward to CampOUT. "The kids really relax here. Every year on the last day of camp, no one wants to leave."

CAMPOUT is Aug. 21 to 24. Register online at www.campwestwind.org or call 503-294-7476 for a brochure.

JODI HELMER is a Portland free-lance writer.

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