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WEEKEND BREAK

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Submitted Photos

When the weather is right, Camp Kiwanilong's Long Lake provides fishing, swimming and canoeing opportunities for visitors.

The gem of Clatsop County

Camp Kiwanilong allows kids to be kids

By **SUE CODY**
 For *The Daily Astorian*

What if there were a place where happy voices echoed in the woods? Where kids could just be kids? Where they could swim, sing silly songs, enjoy a campfire or paddle a canoe? What if this place were safe and nurturing and available to all kids, regardless of their background, income or abilities?

Welcome to Clatsop County, where there is such a place: Camp Kiwanilong. It is the place where Clatsop County history, a founder's passion and a community's embrace created a program that instills respect, understanding and confidence in children.

During Kiwanilong's Summer Youth Program, campers can enjoy five to seven days of overnight camping and activities geared toward having fun, building self-esteem and creating friendships.

"Camp Kiwanilong is a gem in Clatsop County," says former camper and counselor Brooke Duling Stanley. "We are so lucky to have this. The biggest difference is that many summer camps are elitist. They serve the privileged kids. Here, camp is accessible to all kids. It puts everyone on an even playing field where they get to have fun."

Without cellphones, computers or tablets, kids explore the outdoors, sleep in primitive cabins and get to know each other.

"For a lot of kids, camp might be the only time when they just get to focus on being a kid," Stanley says. "They don't have to worry about anything — not their family or food or whatever they worry about with their family."

Valued kids

Deborah Vail's eyes light up when she talks about Camp Kiwanilong. It's no wonder, because she was the spark that started the popular Summer Youth Program and kept it vibrant for 30 years as camp director. Aply, her camp name is Sparky. Now retired, she still serves on the board of directors.



Deborah Vail

"Sparky was the coolest," says Stanley. "As a little kid, I thought she was so fun. She always wore a beanie. She was always in a good mood, she sang the loudest and sang good morning to everyone who entered the dining hall."

Sparky's enthusiasm stems from a genuine caring for a healthy environment.

Kids are asked to sign a contract and follow the Golden Frog Rules. Sparky says the main rule is: Have fun! Other rules are no hitting or hurting with words; listen to your counselor; no running on trails; go to the nurse if you are bleeding — the basics.

"Camp is a unique place where kids are expected to cooperate and get to know each other in a way they don't at school," Stanley says. "They are sleeping in the same cabin, working together. They might be from different schools or different backgrounds, but they learn to work as a team." When they do, they can earn coveted beads like those their counselors wear.

Children of all abilities and income levels are welcome: kids with autism, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder or social difficulties are all treated with dignity and understanding. There are "Sparky-ships" available for children who cannot afford to attend.

Sparky created an environment built on resolving conflict through conversation. "Most conflict arises from misunderstanding," she says. If she saw



Camp Kiwanilong board member Marge Huddleston, left, and Amy Koch, a ranger at the camp, pose at the camp office.

a problem, she invited a cabin or group to meet with her and share their experiences and perceptions.

Once the kids realize someone has autism and reacts differently, they embrace him or her, because they understand, Sparky says. "They learn how to interact with each other. When kids are valued, they behave."

Stanley affirmed Sparky's approach: "She was skilled at conflict resolution. If a camper had a hard time, they would talk to Sparky who often offered an alternative activity. Rarely did anyone need to go home."

Each week has a designated theme, and the counselors create a special event. Once a counselor is in costume — as a pirate, a fairy, a superhero — everything changes. The authority figure is seen as a fun individual. That might be why Sparky always wears a beanie. Who can be threatening in a colorful rainbow beanie?

But, there is a message behind the fun. At the end of the week, each child receives a certificate from their cabin counselor. The instruction to the counselors is to make it meaningful for the child and to sign it. Sparky says, "The camp is based on giving of oneself and realizing the worth of others."

Sparky tells the kids to read their certificate when they are feeling low to see who they really are and who cares about them. "One camper came back years later and said he took his certificate to college," she says.

Reviving Clatsop history

The camp fills a need for healthy summer activities Vail saw when she began teaching in Clatsop County. She was surprised to see the number of children at risk. Children were having difficulty with behavioral, emotional and social problems. There were no options for young children except organized sports, she says.

"I saw a need, and it became a wave."

Pat Kershull, a Girl Scout leader, told Vail there was an abandoned Girl Scout camp on 270 acres in Warrenton that had been closed for a few years. Sitting in a forest of spruce and other trees planted for an arboretum by the Conservation Civilian Corps in the 1930s, it featured cabins, a large dining hall, lakes and meadows. All it needed was a director, Kershull said.

Vail surprised herself on the spot by saying she would direct the camp. Before long, she had recruited teachers to serve as counselors.

The Kiwanis Club stepped in to build cabins, shelters and repair existing buildings that sit beside Long Lake. Thus, Camp Kiwanilong was born from Kiwanis and Long Lake. Kiwanis continues to support the camp.

The property is owned by Clatsop County, but Camp Kiwanilong's board of directors signed a 99-year lease for \$1 per year to run the camp as a nonprofit organization.

Making a difference

Camp Kiwanilong can help struggling children in many ways. School counselors have noticed that students who attend the Summer Youth Program perform

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better in the classroom and have more social contacts. Many times, their behavior improves and they become more self-confident.

Kids wearing their Camp Kiwanilong sweatshirt feel a bond with other kids in their camp shirts, even if they aren't in the same class.

Board member Marge Huddleston says her daughter and grandchildren have developed skills they can use at camp and in their professions. One grandson says he learned his values at Kiwanilong and is working on a doctorate in psychology to help adolescents.

Community embraces camp

Huddleston taught school in Gearhart and sent her children and grandchildren to Camp Kiwanilong.

After retirement, standing in line with her youngest grandchild at camp, she noticed the infirmary door could use some paint.

"It was a pitiful building," Huddleston says. She offered to paint the interior and things took off from there as she and her husband, Dwayne, pitched in to make small repairs. "We put lipstick on the building."

Before long, they were asked to join the board of directors, which oversees the camp year-round. Many in Clatsop County are aware of the six-week flagship Summer Youth Program, says Amy Koch, the part-time camp ranger, but the camp is also available to rent in the off-season. The camp hosts weddings, family reunions, Christmas parties, housing for soccer tournaments, outdoor schools, VOCA (Victory Over Child Abuse) and CERT (community emergency response team) training.

Koch, a lifelong Girl Scout and Kiwanilong fan, books rentals in the spring, fall and winter, and oversees repairs.

Volunteers pitch in to write grants, host fundraisers, organize work parties and make improvements. Local businesses offer discounts, volunteer services and provide materials. "We hire people when we can," Koch says, but with limited funding, volunteers are the core workforce.

Recently the National Guard's 442 Vertical Engineers designed a new craft building and wood shed, Tongue Point Job Corps students laid the concrete floor, Hampton Mill donated the lumber and Windermere Realty built the woodshed.

"This community is very generous," Koch says.

The Gray Foundation, Meyer Memorial Trust, private donations and former campers have also contributed to keep Camp Kiwanilong vibrant.

"It is phenomenal to see where we started and where we are now," Huddleston says. "Every building needed attention. Now we have a strategic plan. The camp can move forward after we are gone."

Even though Sparky has retired, her vision remains as new camp directors take over. After all, she trained them.

Huddleston says, "What makes this special is having this experience right here in our own backyard. And it is provided for the whole community."

The Way to Welbyville and the Columbia Pacific Coordinated Care Organization encourage healthy activities like those offered at Camp Kiwanilong.

For information on how you can help with volunteer time or supplies, or to request a Sparkyship, contact the camp ranger's office at 503-861-2933.

Registration for next summer will begin in February. For more information, visit www.campkiwanilong.org

Sue Cody is the communications lead for the Clatsop County Way to Welbyville. She is also a former deputy managing editor for The Daily Astorian and still does part-time work for the paper. Brooke Duling Stanley, who is quoted in this column, is Cody's daughter.

'It is phenomenal to see where we started and where we are now.'

Marge Huddleston
 Camp Kiwanilong board member, speaking about the camp's transformation