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WEEKEND BREAK

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CAMP KIWANILONG WHERE KIDS CAN BE KIDS



Photos courtesy Camp Kiwanilong

Campers enjoy activities at Camp Kiwanilong's Summer Youth Program.

Camp's Summer Youth Program turns 40, open house takes place June 2

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

Camp Kiwanilong's Summer Youth Program (SYP) is a place where kids can just be kids. Songs and games every day, campfires every night. Sounds like a dream to me. And it's been engaging kids with fun experiences for 40 years.

If you haven't seen the camp or have a camper wary of what it will be like, head on out to Camp Kiwanilong's SYP 40th anniversary open house 1 to 4:30 p.m. Saturday, June 2. Enjoy refreshments, a scavenger hunt, games, touring and meeting staff and supporters.



Sue Cody

"It's a remarkable place to have right here," board Chairwoman Marge Huddleston said. SYP was designed for local youth to have a safe, structured, enriching experience in a beautiful outdoor setting.

"Camp Kiwanilong is a magical place that bridges class and differences and puts everyone on an even playing field where they get to have fun," Brooke (Duling) Stanley, my daughter and a former camp counselor, said.

"In this age of technology, it is more important than ever to get kids to come outside and play all day long," camp director Sarah Widmer said. "We like to get them away from video games, cellphones and tablets."

The camp takes off

Forty-some years ago, Deborah Vail and Jan Clawson were picnicking at Cul-laby Lake with their families when Pat Kershul mentioned there was an unoccupied Girl Scout Camp in Warrenton. Would they ever consider creating a summer program there?

Both educators were working in local schools. Clawson had a degree in recreation education and Vail sang in choirs and organized church retreats. They pooled their talents and created "a program I thought was fun, creative and nurturing," Vail said.

Gathering teachers for counselors, choosing fun names and designing the program around songs and campfires in a welcoming atmosphere, the camp took off. It began with two one-week sessions and has grown to six sessions over the years.

Vail became "Sparky" and Clawson, who ran the aquatic program at the lake, was "Splash." As co-directors, they ran the

IF YOU GO

CAMP KIWANILONG OPEN HOUSE

WHEN: 1 to 4:30 p.m. Saturday, June 2

WHERE: Camp Kiwanilong Road, Warrenton

DIRECTIONS: Turn into the west soccer field parking lot at 1100 N.W. Ridge Road and follow the road parallel to Ridge Road. It winds through the woods to camp.

WHAT: Cake, tours, games, meet staff and board members

INFORMATION: Call 503-861-2933 or 503-741-5975

program for 10 years. Sparky stayed on for another 20 years.

"Sparky was the coolest," said Stanley, whose counselor name was "Rainbow." "As a little kid, I thought she was so fun. She always wore a beanie. She was always in a good mood and she sang the loudest."

"When I was a counselor, she provided structure and inspired safety and the confidence we needed to have a lot of fun."

All kids are welcome regardless of their abilities, financial situation or background. "We wanted everybody to be able to come," Clawson said. "Diabetic children or kids with other special needs — we had to learn as we went."

Even though the directors have changed, Sparky was their mentor. Melissa Reid "Molasses" was in charge when Sparky retired, and now Sarah Widmer "Sprite" is taking the helm.

"If there is a misunderstanding, we still have 'Sparky talks,'" Widmer said. "This really is her place. She was in charge for 30 years."

"My hope is to be a continuation of the camp that Sparky directed. Come have fun. Be kind. Learn how to get along with kids."

"It's a remarkable place to have right here in Clatsop County," Huddleston said. "It is ours, it is here, it's available."

The setting

The Civilian Conservation Corps planted trees as an arboretum on 270 acres in the 1930s. Built alongside Long Lake, a large dining hall, first aid station and administrative cabins populate the entrance. Wide open meadows are used for games, campfires and activities. Primitive cabins pop up like mushrooms in the forest.

New shelters and an art space are perfect for gathering in the rain.

In the beginning, Kiwanis Club stepped in to build cabins and repair existing buildings. A combination of the names from Long Lake and Kiwanis are how the camp came to be named.

Volunteers have taken the momentum to new heights with constant upgrades and shelters. "Over 40 years, different people have added different talents to keep the program afloat," Huddleston said.

"I love that when you are volunteering, you can see kids come to camp and jump out of the car and begin playing."



Heroics and hilarity at Camp Kiwanilong.



Camp Kiwanilong.



Kids have fun at Camp Kiwanilong.