

Camp mixes arts, activism

By Marco C. Baker
PGN Editorial Assistant

A tradition as American as apple pie, sleep-away camp's care-free, campfire lit image is challenged annually by local youth from sexual minority families over two summer weeks in southern New Jersey.

But Camp Mountain Meadow — a place where campers might equally express opinions on same-sex marriage and their enthusiasm for canoeing — makes sure apolitical fun remains buoyant among more grown-up concerns.

For example, campers engage in a challenge course that illustrates "what different forms of oppression look like," explained Carolyn Thompson, executive director of the non-profit Mountain Meadow.

But frivolous activity is just as vital to youth who may normally find ridicule or alienation on the playground, she noted.

"Even during unstructured free time, campers ask questions and have conversations not completely separate from our advocacy," she said.

About an hour away from Philadelphia in the Vineland, N.J., area, Mountain Meadow can accommodate 81 9-to-17-year-olds.

The camp's advocacy of progressive values — last year, counselors instructed campers on challenging racism and sexism — can be traced to its past as a girl's feminist summer retreat.

Revived in 1991, Mountain Meadow's new mission was to act as a peer meeting place and an oasis where self-esteem could flourish — for all children able to share in the commonalities brought

If you go

What: Mountain Meadow, a summer camp for children of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender parents

When: Aug. 15-28

Where: Southern New Jersey, near Vineland

Information: (215) 772-1107; Web site: www.mountainmeadow.org

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by having at least one gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender parent.

Mountain Meadow also functions as a year-round program which recently held a youth letter-writing campaign to oppose the Federal Marriage Amendment. Kinyati and La Kia Hammond's five children did not participate; on their own initiative, they lobbied the White House so their mother's March 22 marriage in Victoria, British Columbia, might be legal stateside someday.

The Newark, Del., couple's 10- and 11-year-old daughters this year will attend Mountain Meadow, which they agreed most importantly shows children from families like theirs that they are not alone.

Kinyati Hammond, a stay-at-home mom, said their oldest son returned a "different child" from his previous "odd-man-out" status at school.

He learned the limited value of

cliquishness at Mountain Meadow, added Hammond, who believes the promotion of progressive values does not dishearten or bleach the character from youthful individuality. Campers are, after all, at varying levels of accepting themselves as children of a sexual minority, Thompson explained.

"They know it's OK to express what they want," she said. "They can even say homophobic things, but they can't aim it at others."

There are warm showers, a dining hall, swimming pool, arts and crafts, water activities and, of course, sports at Mountain Meadow. Campers sleep in mixed-gender "tent circles" (bathrooms are gender-neutral, too) grouped by age.

And for the privilege of overseeing sometimes unruly youth, Mountain Meadow has at times had as many as 200 applicants interested in 20 counselor positions, Thompson said. She cites the camp's "specialty nature" for the heavy interest. (Counselors undergo two interviews and must pass reference and criminal-background checks.) Increasing the camp's accessibility, parents pay tuition based on income.

Writing to the president, the three eldest Hammond children expressed how an FMA would undermine the normalcy of their family, and prevent the rights and responsibilities they deserve, according to La Kia Hammond, a financial analyst. Their message hit the streets June 13 when the youngsters marched through Center City with other youth in the annual pride parade. ▼