

Camp gives gay parents' children a chance to breathe freely

At Mountain Meadow in Gloucester County, the talk centers on the fact that they are not alone. Truth is, there are millions.

By Wendy Ginsberg
INQUIRER SUBURBAN STAFF

NEWFIELD — The campers at Mountain Meadow jostled in line on one side of the grass, waiting for commands from the megaphone.

"Cross the grass if you like dogs," counselor Karen Miller said.

Many scurried across the Gloucester County field.

"Cross the grass if you are the child of lesbian parents," Miller said.

Some visibly inhaled, seemingly weighing their next move.

"I was, like, 'Oh, my gosh! Am I going to be the only one?'" said Grace

Harman, 10, of the Germantown section of Philadelphia.



ROSE HOWERTER/Inquirer-Suburban Staff
Engaged in a discussion that they don't often have a chance to have are (from left) Maayan Rosenzweig, 13, Jette Johnson, 12, Kimber Montgomery, 12, counselor Tom Robbins, 37, Jeremy Moore, 12, Audrey Laurelion, 20, and Peter Schamp, 14. Mountain Meadow is the only such camp on the East Coast.

But then she noticed something surprising: Dozens of campers joined her in trekking across the field.

"I'd never met anyone with two moms before. I was always the only one," said Beata Colovan, 9, of Boston.

"But then everyone crossed, and I felt much, much better."

Founded in 1980, Mountain Meadow summer camp brings together children of homosexual parents. For two weeks, the campers take over Girl Scout grounds and hold intense daily discussions about what it is like to have homosexual or bisexual parents, about living with HIV/AIDS, about coping with divorce and prejudice.

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For many, this is a first chance to discuss their nontraditional families and the teasing they get at school.

"This is a place I look forward to going to every year before school starts. When I first came here, it was a relief," said Bryan Corley, 12, of Windham, N.Y., who was in his third year at Mountain Meadow.

Referring to his nontraditional family, one camper, 12, said "you can't talk about it" at school.

"I have two moms," Corley boasted on Monday before hanging his head as he recalled being choked by classmates berating his family.

"Everybody at my school knows," he said. "But you can't talk about it. You can't even tell your teacher sometimes."

Seventy-five campers between the ages of 9 and 17 arrived Saturday and immediately dived into a schedule of activities that included canoeing, hip-hop dancing and stage design.

Campers and counselors agree, however, that the frank discussions are the part of camp that will be remembered the longest. These talks, they say, help dispel some of the myths associated with hav-

ing gay or lesbian parents.

The American Bar Association estimates that there are six million to 10 million children of lesbian, gay or bisexual parents in the United States. Early studies indicate that there is not a higher incidence of homosexuality among these children.

"I wanted to show these kids that they can grow up and be like any other kid," said counselor Ryan LaLonde, 26, of Washington, whose mother has been living with her partner since he was 10.

"As a teenager, I thought that I was all by myself. When I got older, I started seeing people discriminate against my family, but we didn't have a family discussion about it until I was 22."

Now LaLonde proudly shows off photos of his parents.

At Mountain Meadow, traditional American Indian campsite names, such as Cherokee and Lenape, are trumped by placards displaying the names of famous lesbian, gay and bisexual people or straight supporters of the gay community.

The Pedro Zamora campsite, for example, is named after the star of MTV's *Real World* who died of AIDS in 1994.

Bathrooms, meanwhile, are divided into three categories: boys, girls and anyone.

"We have some counselors here who are still questioning their gender and others who don't define themselves as male or female," camp director Brent Satterly said.

Mountain Meadow got its start in upstate New York, on a farm owned by the family of Rabbi Julie Greenberg, a lesbian who directs the Jewish Renewal Life Center in the Mount Airy section of Philadelphia. Three years ago, the camp moved to Gloucester County.

On Tuesday, in their small-group discussions, the campers hesitantly shared their family stories and their tales of torment by some of their peers.

Some made sure to applaud

their parents' choice of partners.

"I sometimes give them advice," Richard Aguirre, 13, of Brooklyn, N.Y., said of his mother's partners.

"Then," he joked, "I tell my mom to keep the ones that buy me the most presents."

"My kids never realized that there were other kids like them out there," said Kim Havens, 30, of Ventnor, who works in the camp kitchen.

She moved in with her partner more than a year ago, uniting her daughter and her partner's two girls. Havens' daughter, Jessica, and her partner's daughter, Carrie, are attending Mountain Meadow for the first time.

"It's just been great here," Havens said. "Carrie referred to me as her stepmother for the first time. She's never been open like that before. It's amazing."

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