

# Base Camp

Summer haven provides stability and fun for kids from the hardscrabble side of rural life

AT 7 A.M. ON A LATE AUGUST DAY BY LAKE FAIRLEE, campers emerge from their platform tents with sleepy eyes and sweatshirts zippered against the morning chill. A makeshift band — composed of Matt Melendy, 9, on honky horn, Ben Chambers, 8, on flexitone, and three staff members — plays a reveille with gusto as everyone drifts down the hill. Youngsters sit on the dining hall steps by the lake cuddled under blankets watching the brave ones strip down to their bathing suits and cannonball through the mist into the water. From her perch on the steps, Marisha Stimpson, 14, explains with typical teenage ennui that her hometown of North Concord is “the most boring place on earth.” But, the seven-year camp veteran adds enthusiastically, “I love everything about camp.”

By MELISSA PASANEN  
Photographed by JORDAN SILVERMAN



**“These are kids who live in a stressed environment, I’m not saying they’re not loved, but these kids have rough lives.”**

Summer camp is always a blast, but especially so for youngsters at Camp Exclamation Point, which provides a weeklong respite from hardscrabble lives for children who come from the not-so-bucolic side of rural life. Some live in isolated communities, or lack family and community resources, and many are the children of temporary agriculture workers, who often uproot seasonally and have other family-stability issues.

“These are kids who live in a stressed environment,” says Erin Shea, recruitment coordinator of the Vermont Migrant Education Program, whose work ties in with the camp. “I’m not saying they’re not loved, but these kids have rough lives.”

Launched in 1988, the camp at that time was federally funded by the Vermont Migrant Education Program, which focuses on educational support services for children of families that relocate for seasonal or temporary agriculture work.

In Vermont, this is most often families of farm workers on large dairy farms looking for job security or better pay.

When funding dried up after the camp’s third season, staff couldn’t bear to see it disappear, recalls Judy Bush, the original arts director and later the camp director for many years. She said it had quickly become obvious that the camp provided a touchstone of stability and continuity for children who experience little of either in their lives. “At camp, you are part of the community and you can come back,” says Bush. “It gives you a feeling of belonging. It gives you an idea of what can be.”

After a group brainstorm, the nonprofit Camp Exclamation Point was born. The camp still gives priority to children in the Vermont Migrant Education Program, but also now reaches out to other youngsters in need due to rural isolation, lack of family and community resources, and disruption

of life, including frequent moves; of 110 campers each year, 85 percent qualify for government food subsidy programs.

The free camp runs on a modest annual budget met through grants and fundraising. The Aloha Foundation, which owns the camp facility, charges a minimal rental fee and the 80-plus staff members — ages 18 to 68 with teachers, bakers and lawyers among them — are almost exclusively volunteers, many of whom use vacation time to come every year. “I’ve never met a group of people who are so dedicated; camp is like a rock in the life of these kids,” says Shea.

A few minutes before 8 a.m., the sun shines softly through the mist on the lake, swimmers towel themselves off, and breakfast is served. Campers carry trays of cereal, locally grown melon and freshly baked blueberry coffeecake back to their “table families.” About three-quarters of campers





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return each year and table assignments vary from year to year, one of the many ways camp works to create different forms of community. At one table, there are six campers ages 8 to 13 sitting with two counselors and counselor-in-training Abby Nash, 16, of Cabot, who has been coming to camp with some of her seven siblings since she was 8. Each shares a favorite part of camp: “the meals and all the stuff you learn from everybody,” says Mia Eaton, 13, of East Corinth; “being able to help everybody in a lower pod,” says Tyler Poquette, 13, of Milton, referring to the newer campers; kayaking, swimming and archery, the younger kids throw in. Nash reflects for a few minutes: “It’s definitely a safe and fun and loving environment,” she offers with a shy smile, “and that’s not something you can find everywhere.”

Before campers head off to do chores, followed by their choice of activities including spear-throwing, sushi-making

and canoe rescue, there is a sing-along with lots of dancing, laughter and hugs. A few kids hang back, but most are fully engaged. “You build community by wrapping your arms around kids from the moment they arrive,” managing director Harry Frank explains later. “There’s always a kid who gets off the bus and is a challenge every step of the way, but by the end of the week they’re in tears when it’s time to leave. They have not been a pleasure to deal with, but there is a commitment we have to each other. ... It’s always amazing to me how difficult it is to say goodbye.”

Many never say a final goodbye. “People come here and they don’t stop coming,” says Troy Scully, a counselor from New Jersey. Not only do staff return, but a number of former campers have become volunteers. It’s about giving back and staying connected, explains Holly Brown of Bakersfield, who sent three children to camp, all of whom

are now in college but return to volunteer whenever they can. “It was the most outrageous gift we were ever given for our kids,” she says.

Josceyln Knight of St. Albans has attended camp every summer but one for 20 years. Now 28, she spends a week of her vacation volunteering and also serves on the camp board. When she was a child, her family moved fairly often for her father’s farm work. “You’d go to school and if you’d been in the barn, they’d tease you like, ‘Moo, you smell like a cow,’” she recalls. “But at camp everyone’s equal. They’re not judging you. I just loved camp so much. It’s a part of my life. They’re my extended family. I will do it forever.” 🍁

To see a slide show of summer fun at Camp Exclamation Point, visit [www.VermontLife.com](http://www.VermontLife.com).



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