

FIRST-TIMERS ACE SUMMER CAMP

By Hailey Eisen

Glenburnie Summer Camp – photograph by Tim Fraser

Whether you're three years old or 17, the first camp experience can be a little scary. However, many first-timers find the camp spirit becomes contagious after a few days or even just a few hours.

Once you've experienced the magic of summer camp, it's hard to find any place quite as amazing. And so, first-timers quickly become seasoned campers who are counting the days until the next summer.



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Day Camps

Name: Alana

Age: 17

Camp: Camp Kodiak

Session length: 7 weeks

As Alana stepped off the bus at Camp Kodiak, a girl named Jessica approached and introduced herself. She was younger, but it turned out the girls had a lot in common. "At school, you have cliques and it's harder to make friends," says Alana, speaking inside the camp office last August. "Here all different ages hang out together and it's easier to fit in because everyone has some sort of disability."

Alana's learning disability has always made her feel different in the classroom, explains her mom, Stacey Bolan, speaking from their home in Sudbury. "At Kodiak, Alana realized that we all have our differences, and that made her more comfortable in her own skin."

As a Leader-in-Training, Alana not only enjoyed being a camper, but was also able to learn leadership skills and gain experience working with kids. At the stables, Alana assisted counsellors and helped younger campers trot horses around the ring. "To be a good leader, you have to be confident and know what you're doing," she says. "And, once you put a smile on a kid's face, it really brightens up your whole day."

Alana also had the chance to overcome her fears by conquering a few more

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challenging activities. For two weeks, she visited the water-ski dock. "Everyone was encouraging me, telling me, 'You can do this!' and when I finally got up on skis, it was pretty great." She also faced her fear of heights at the high ropes course. "At first it was scary," she says. "But then I was like: 'Oh my god, I actually did that!'"

Back home, Alana is preparing for a trip to Toronto to visit her friend Jessica. While she felt homesick at first, she says camp soon became like a second home. "Alana had some pretty positive influences there," says her mom. "I think it will be a lasting experience that will help her throughout the school year."



Alana at Camp Kodiak – photograph by Colin O'Connor

Name: Lara

Age: 9

Camp: Art Gallery of Ontario Art Camps

Session length: 1 week

Inside one of the main galleries of the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto, Lara and her fellow campers gather around a glass case to look at delicate wax sculptures on display. They listen as their instructor explains the sculptures' historic significance and the artists' intentions in creating them. He asks some questions—trying to get the campers' take on the work—before giving the youths a few minutes to wander around the gallery. The intention is to inspire their creativity so it can be transferred to their own work.

Back in the large, brightly lit studio in the basement of the AGO, the campers are given a ball of wax to work with. "I've never been to the AGO before," says Lara, who usually spends her summers in Germany with her family.

"And I've never made a sculpture."

Though Lara loves to paint and draw, her mom says they chose the AGO camp last summer because she doesn't have the same opportunity to explore her creativity in school. "I would prefer to have Lara just do one camp per summer because that way she really gets excited about it, and it doesn't become something she has to do," says Susanne Friedrich.

After camp, Lara's at home, drawing a sunset with pencil crayons. "My drawing did improve a lot after camp," she says, recalling her experience. "We also got to make a sculpture out of clay, and we drew a street with weird houses where the doors and windows could open and there were people inside the doors."

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Lara at the Art Gallery of Ontario Art Camps – photograph by Cheol Joon Baek



Lindsey at Camp Couchiching – photograph by Colin O'Connor

Next summer I'd love to
come back here for a month. ||

Name: Lindsey

Age: 13

Camp: Camp Couchiching

Session length: 2 weeks

Inside Camp Couchiching's dining hall, the entire camp erupts into song as four teams begin chanting four different team cheers simultaneously. The camp has been divided into teams for "Cooch Games," two days of friendly competition involving sports, dance, drama, swimming and other activities. For an outsider, all the early-morning noise is a bit overwhelming, but for the campers, singing after their meals has become second nature. It's the last day of the camp's third session and many kids will soon head home after two action-packed weeks.

One of these campers is Lindsey, who lives in Toronto, and had never been to camp before this year. "We usually spend our summers travelling," says Lindsey, whose mom and dad are from

Portugal and Vancouver, respectively. "I've always wanted to do this and I'm really glad I did."

In order to attend the camp on the shores of Lake Couchiching, near Orillia, Lindsey promised to earn half the cost of the two-week session. During the school year, she saved \$500 by helping with her mom's jewellery design business and babysitting. "Next summer I'd love to come back here for a month," she says.

Sitting on the sidelines of an oversized sports field, Lindsey and I chat as her team participates in an ultimate Frisbee game. The bubbly teenager had no trouble making new friends, but says it helped that a few girls from school also came to

the camp. "I wasn't homesick because my parents sent me e-mails and packages," Lindsey says. "But the girls who were (homesick) put pictures of their families up around their beds and that helped."

Lindsey's biggest challenge was a two-night canoe trip that involved hours of paddling and portaging. "I had never been in a canoe before and at first I thought, 'Ugh, should I really be doing this?'" It turns out the trip was a great experience; Lindsey says she became a confident canoeist and learned a lot about herself. Aside from a few mosquito bites, she was unscathed. "Camp helped me become more responsible and aware," she says.

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Charlotte at Sportplay Inc. – photograph by Ashley Hutcheson

Name: Charlotte
Age: 5
Camp: Sportplay Inc.
Session length: 1 week

In a well-lit gymnasium in the basement of a church in Toronto’s Bloor West Village, 30 kids between the ages of three and eight are running around, bouncing miniature basketballs. It is 9 a.m. on the third day of a weeklong session at Sportplay Inc., and the day campers are warming up. This is Charlotte’s first time at summer camp, and she’s here with her three-year-old brother, Isaac.

“I didn’t get to experience camp as a kid but I’d always heard great things,” says their mom, Rosemary Stiglic. “I chose this program because I wanted them to meet new friends and stay active.”

Outside, Charlotte and Isaac chat about their camp experience as the campers gear up for an innovative game that will teach them to throw overhand by making a muscle, then releasing the ball. “One day we got tennis racquets and beanbags and we pretended they were pancakes,”

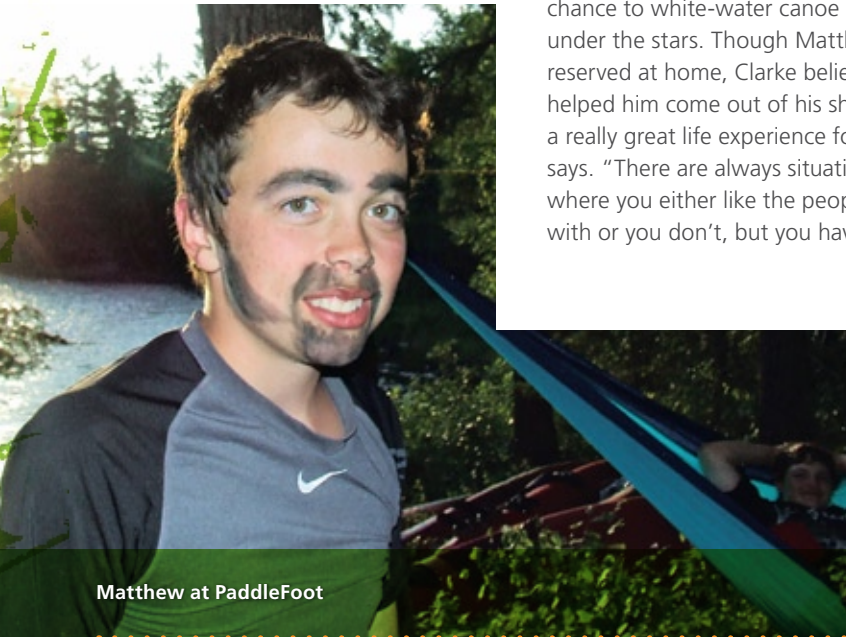
Charlotte says. “And we put a rubber chicken on a parachute and taught it how to fly.” Asked if she likes her counsellors, Charlotte nods. “They are nice and helpful and friendly,” she says.

For Isaac, the best part of camp so far is the “doughnut game”—also called “rolling doughnuts”—where campers run after and try to stop rolling hula-hoops. This game usually involves lots of laughter as the campers cheer on their friends.

Isaac and Charlotte are young, and their mom says camp helped them prepare for school by teaching rules while encouraging fun. “Every afternoon they left camp really excited and energetic,” she says. “Their confidence and independence definitely increased throughout the week.” Charlotte says she definitely wants to go back next summer, while Stiglic would love her kids to spend more time at day camp and even try overnight camp.

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*Name: Matthew
Age: 14
Camp: PaddleFoot
Session length: 1 week*



Matthew at PaddleFoot

When it came to choosing a summer camp for his son Matthew, Greg Clarke wanted an outdoor adventure that would push the 14-year-old outside his comfort zone—just a bit. He found PaddleFoot online and liked that it offered kids the chance to white-water canoe and sleep under the stars. Though Matthew is fairly reserved at home, Clarke believes this trip helped him come out of his shell. “It was a really great life experience for him,” he says. “There are always situations in life where you either like the people you’re with or you don’t, but you have a goal to

achieve and you have to work together to accomplish it.”

As it turned out, Matthew liked the seven teenagers on his weeklong coed trip, and they’ve been e-mailing each other ever since returning home. “I was nervous at the beginning because I didn’t know anyone,” says the Grade 10 student from Ottawa. On the bus ride to Algonquin Park, he says everyone was quiet. When they arrived, they launched their canoes and paddled to the first camp, where they played games to break the ice. “I actually made a good friend on the first day, who I canoed with every day after that,” Matthew says. “He had gone to camp before and he was more open and stuff...he talked to me and I opened up more.”

While living outdoors, Matthew says he matured quite a bit. “I didn’t really enjoy the food that much, but I ate it every single day because I knew I had to,” he says. “We cooked all of our meals over a fire, which was pretty cool.”



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