

How DEC Summer Camp Shaped My Life

By Bret Canary

How DEC Summer Camp Shaped My Life

In the summer of 1990 my parents drove me into the heart of the Adirondacks for a weeklong stay at Camp Colby, one of four DEC outdoor education camps. I was 13 years old at the time and had butterflies in my stomach knowing that my parents were dropping me off to stay with strangers.

As we pulled in, most kids were huddled around the docks of Lake Colby. I thought, "Oh no, a swim test." It was a typical August day in the Adirondacks, breezy and cool...more like September. I reluctantly changed into my swim trunks and got in line. Sooner than I wanted, it was my turn. I jumped from the dock, it was like slow motion as I floated through the air, looking at the beautiful surroundings while I descended, the sun shimmering over the waves. The shock of the water snapped me back to reality, taking every bit of air out of my lungs. Panicking, I swam through the cold, thick water. After what seemed like forever, I finished the test and passed. I remember getting out with uncontrollable shivering. A counselor came over and asked what my name was, and I replied "B-r-r-r-ret Canary." Immediately another counselor came over and together they sang me "Canary in a Coalmine" by The Police. I knew then I was going to be just fine. But what I didn't know was this memory would be the first of many that would ultimately affect my life decisions and shape my career.

The week at camp went by quickly, filled with adventures—night hikes, animal tracking, climbing the High Peaks, games, and so much more. The counselors were very knowledgeable and always entertaining with their humor and crazy antics. It was impossible not to admire them and want to be a counselor just like them.

For years, I kept those adventures fresh in my memory with photos, thoughts, and a camp journal I still have today. I never gave up my desire to be a camp counselor and in the summer of 2000, my goal was realized. Not only did I become a counselor, but I returned to Camp Colby and was charged with overseeing the boys' cabin I had stayed in ten years earlier.

The adventures began anew my first year as a counselor, with fresh experiences and memories—climbing Wright Peak in August, teaching field ecology, and Friday night campfires reliving the week's events and preparing for emotional goodbyes. Nothing surpassed seeing in the campers' eyes the same excitement and enthusiasm I had felt as a camper. I just hoped I left as strong an impression on them as previous counselors did on me.

One of the highlights of camp was hunter education training. The campers have the option to earn their hunter safety certificate, studying the safety, ethics, and laws of hunting and firearm handling. New York State Environmental



I took this at "The Boq"



We climbed Ampersand Mountain

DEC camp is an unforgettable experience. The adventures kids have and knowledge they gain may even carry them into an exciting and rewarding career in an environmental field. Any youth 12 to 17 years old may attend, and oftentimes an organization will sponsor a child to go. While it may seem early to be thinking about camp, registration begins in February. So, if you know a child interested in attending one of DEC's four camps, and would like to learn more, visit our website at www.dec.ny.gov/education/29.html, call (518) 402-8014 or e-mail us at edcamps@gw.dec.state.ny.us



Just as when Bret attended Camp Colby, youth who attend a DEC summer camp today get to enjoy a variety of outdoor activities, including hiking.

Conservation Officers assist with this training. I looked forward to hearing their stories and watching the kids stare in awe at their uniforms and listen with rapt attention. I found myself respecting the officers, wanting to be like them. Their presence, love for the job, and experiences made the career seem like no other and one that I knew I would love to do.

I spent four summers as a DEC camp counselor. In the “off” season, I studied natural resource management at SUNY Plattsburgh. After graduation I watched for the Environmental Conservation Officer exam to be announced, doing odd jobs in the interim as I waited for my dream career to take off. Soon, I took the test and passed. A background investigation, physical fitness test, and interviews ensued. Then I had to wait to be called for the academy. Months passed as I worked at an auto detailing facility, just biding my time. Beginning to despair and about to pursue a different career, I finally got the call—I was going to the academy!

I attended the 15th Basic Academy in Oswego, graduating in June 2004. After almost five years on the job, I still can't believe I'm wearing the uniform. The pride I feel every day I get dressed for duty is a constant reminder of what got me here in the first place. Being an Environmental Conservation Officer is, by far, the best job in the world; I can't see myself doing anything else.

I owe a debt of gratitude to my parents for bringing me to Camp Colby, the Environmental Conservation Officers who kept the spark going, and my wife for encouraging me through the academy.

But most of all, I owe it to the camp counselors, who guided a week that changed my life.

Environmental Conservation Officer **Bret Canary** works in St. Lawrence County.



Photo courtesy of Bret Canary

New York State Conservationist, February 2009



Susan L. Shafer

Happy Campers

Many people recall their days at DEC camp with affection and happy memories. For some, like Bret Canary, their experience set the stage for their future career. Time and again, DEC employees who were past campers identify camp as the place where “it all started.” So we asked them to tell us about their experiences. The following are just a few of the many responses we received.

“I was a camp counselor for Camp Rushford, Camp Colby and Camp DeBruce. It was the best job of my life. I have a journal from some of the trips I did with the campers that they wrote themselves.”

Mary Jo Crance, DEC Wildlife Biologist

“From swimming, to jumping in a bog, to singing silly songs, Camp Colby was the most enjoyable summer camp I ever attended.”

Gina Fanelli, DEC Marine Biologist

“I attended Camp Colby in 1977. The forestry and ecology lessons were fascinating. After I graduated with a bachelor of science degree in Chemical Engineering, and saw an announcement for the Junior Engineer exam with positions at DEC, it seemed almost preordained that I should take a job here—the DEC mission having been instilled a decade before at a beautiful and fun camp.”

Kathy Prather, DEC Environmental Engineer

“I went to Conservation Camp during the Korean War and it made a positive impression that has influenced my career as a wildlife pathologist.”

Ward B. Stone, DEC Wildlife Pathologist

“I attended Camp DeBruce in 1977. I remember not being old enough to take my hunter safety course, but the counselors allowed me to run the skeet thrower for the kids who had just taken their courses. I also remember hiking up a mountain in the dark and camping in the woods with minimal supplies. It was a really neat experience.”

Robert W. Yager, DEC Mined Land Reclamation Specialist 2

“I attended Camp DeBruce in the early 1970s. The main educational experience I recall was the hunter safety training class. It was a good opportunity to learn about firearms safety.”

Scott J. Stoner, Chief, Standards and Analytical Support Section, Water Assessment and Management, DEC