

String of Memories

—a week at a DEC education camp can change lives

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Supplied by author



by Dannielle Perry

In the spring of 1995, my father asked me if I would be interested in spending a week at an environmental education camp that coming summer. The Chautauqua County Fish and Game Club would be sponsoring a child to attend a camp operated by the New York State

Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC). Little did I know that my simple “yes” would become a lifelong relationship with DEC’s summer camps. To some, summer camp is a place to meet friends, play outside and explore new things. To me, camp is home.

I remember my first day like it was yesterday. On the ride there, the butterflies in my stomach multiplied. I was 12 years old, and nervous about the unknown adventures that my first stay at an overnight camp might bring. As we pulled up, I had my initial view of Camp Rushford: a pond and two large, long cabins. There were other families dropping off campers just like me. My parents commented on how beautiful the place was, but all I could think about was whether or not I would survive my week there.

The camp staff greeted our car and made me feel welcome and at home right away. While I unpacked my belongings in my assigned cabin, I met my bunkmates. It was their first week at Camp Rushford too, and it didn’t take long for us to realize that we were all equally nervous. My mother reassured me that I’d have a wonderful time, and that she and my father would be back in a week, eager to hear about my adventures.

With our parents gone, we settled down to our first meal, followed by group games that introduced us to each other, and then a campfire. It was overwhelming and exciting at the same time. As I crawled into bed that first night, thoroughly exhausted, I thought about all the fun things the camp counselors told us we’d be doing that week: forest, field and water lessons, games, trips to the bog, canoeing, making campfires, swimming and learning to work together as a group. The nervous feeling was gone, and I was excited to wake and begin the adventures ahead.

The week flew by. On Friday (the last full day of camp), each camper was handed eight different beads to take home—a reminder of everything we had learned and discovered during the week, both of the outdoors, and of ourselves. While I packed my things that final night, I decided that I had to come back the next summer.

Camp Rushford became my summer home. I spent winter months wondering which staff members would return, and how many campers I would see again. Over time, changes took place: new cabins were built, my first bunkhouse became a classroom, the director's cabin became a work space for staff, and familiar staff moved on to new jobs. Despite the changes (or perhaps because of them), the excitement of camp was always there. Over the ensuing years, I transitioned from camper to returnee camper to volunteer and eventually joined the camp staff. For me, there was no place on Earth quite like Camp Rushford.

Being a member of the camp staff, it was now my responsibility to help campers make memories. I led activities, encouraged laughter, and challenged kids to try new things. I was constantly reflecting on the years when I was a camper, and used what I learned from my camp counselors to try to make the camp experience as rewarding for the new recruits as it had been for me. My counselors had been my role models and mentors, and I wanted to be just like them. Preparing to lead campers on a night hike (one of my favorite activities), I thought back to my first night hike, remembering where my counselor took us, and how he affected each and every camper in our group.



Camp is still the topic of my conversations throughout the winter months, and I can't wait for summer.



In 2007, my summer camp journey led me from Camp Rushford to Pack Forest (another DEC summer camp) when I was hired there to be the assistant director. I would be taking my love for camp one step further by helping new counselors grow, teaching them to affect campers' lives as I had been affected. I met this new challenge with enthusiasm, as my years at Camp Rushford had trained me to do.

This time, I was arriving at camp on my own, leaving my parents at home. Driving through the Adirondacks for the first time on my way to Pack Forest, I got that nervous feeling again. I was starting the camp process over again, just like a first-time camper. Would the camp staff like me? Would I like this new camp? Could it be anything like Rushford, my "home away from home?" As I pulled into the driveway, the butterflies from my 12-year-old self began to flutter in my stomach. I resisted turning back to Rushford and the familiar. I thought of my experiences there and remembered that "if you want something badly enough, put your whole heart into it, and believe." Though the new job at a new camp would be a challenge, I knew I could do it.

Like my first day at Rushford, I was greeted by friendly staff at Pack Forest and welcomed right away. As I unpacked my bags for the summer, the first thing I pulled from my bag was the beaded necklace I made my first year as a



James Clayton

camper. That simple, colorful strand of beads reminded me why I was at camp, and that my role was now to help guide staff and campers to build their own lifetime of memories. Each Sunday night campfire held at the opening of a new week symbolized a new beginning for the next generation of campers.

Twelve years after my first summer at Camp Rushford, that first summer at Pack Forest brought about more life-changing insights. I had always wanted to work with children in a teaching setting, but had never thought of environmental education as teaching. In 2010 I received my Masters of Science in Environmental Education, and with it, now I share my love of the outdoors with the students in

my classroom. Every day I draw upon the skills I learned at camp: how to motivate young learners, how to listen, how to share, and how to laugh.

Camp is still the topic of my conversations throughout the winter months, and I can't wait for summer. I look forward to seeing returning staff, meeting new staff, and eagerly awaiting the arrival of campers. Perhaps among the campers there will be someone just like me, with butterflies in their stomach and curiosity in their heart. Perhaps, like me, he or she will treasure that string of beads from their first week at camp, representing the string of memories sure to last a lifetime.

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DEC operates four summer camps across New York State for youth (ages 11 to 17) who are interested in nature and the environment. Campers enjoy a balance of environmental education, sportsman education and outdoor fun, via lessons, hands-on activities and games. Hiking, canoeing and swimming are just some of the fun ways attendees can learn new outdoor skills. Campers leave with a love for the natural world that will last a lifetime.

If you or someone you know would like to find out more about attending or working at one of DEC's summer camps, visit our website at www.dec.ny.gov/education/29.html.