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HARKENING BACK

NICHOLAS PFOSI FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Lucas Raskin led the cheer as the boys at Camp Moosilauke celebrated the return of power during a rainy afternoon.

At New Hampshire camp, boys of all backgrounds find common ground in unplugged and quintessentially summer activities

ORFORD, N.H. — As the gathering dusk surrenders to a warm summer night, constellations take their timeless forms in an ink-black sky and Port Miller stands before a lakefront campfire and tells the Legend of the Great White Ape that attacks a summer camp — a boys' camp just like this one.

Before him, boys in a tight circle sit rapt. There are no visual aids. There are no parents around. There isn't an iPhone in sight.

It's just Miller, the quiet night, the still lake, and the boys' imaginations. And it's magic.

"I tell them what we're going to do is called conversation," said Miller, who turns 82 next week. "And they look at you with a little grin on their faces. They each have a different vision of what that ape looks like."

Miller is the former director and the spiritual soul of Camp Moosilauke, one of the oldest summer camps in the United States, a 100-acre jewel in the shadow of Mount Cube. It sits on a mile-long lakefront tucked into the White Mountains near the Vermont border.

Now run by his children and their families, the camp has a governing principle that is deceptively simple and astonishingly successful: Let boys be boys.

How? Try something different. Great at tennis? Try kayaking. Want to be cool? Be your best self. Catch a fish. Or a frog. Aim for a bull's-eye. Swim at sunrise. Climb a mountain. Sail a boat. Go for a run. Shoot some hoops. Shoot the breeze.

There are legends and traditions that stretch back nearly to the camp's founding 113 years ago. At mealtime, in a mess hall whose timbers date back to 1904, there are rhythmic chanting, silly songs about teapots, and theatrical announcements from veteran counselors who campers look up to with worshipful eyes.

Look around the room, and you'll see nobody who's too cool for school. Instead, there's laughter, back-slapping, inside jokes, and total buy-in.

The sons of investment bankers and movie stars sit next to kids from homes in Harlem and from neighborhoods where outdoor play is a dangerous pursuit.

Kids like Jacob Smith from the Bronx and David Falis from Verona, N.J., both 15, who sat with me at breakfast the other morning. They forged an unlikely friendship here four years ago, a friendship nurtured year-round by social media and replenished each summer during their 4½-week session here in the mountains.

"Even though we come from completely different places, we tend to have the same interests and we've come to count on each other," Jacob told me over a breakfast of sausage links and French toast.

'Socio-economic status doesn't matter," David, sitting next to his friend, said. "You don't know who has money and who doesn't. When I met Jacob, it didn't matter at all."

That sort of diversity is uncommon and hard to come by. The codirectors of the camp, Port Miller's daughter Sabina, and her husband, Bill McMahon, have been at it for nearly 30 years. They both have college degrees from Colgate and graduate degrees from Columbia. They both work as administrators at a private school in Southern California.

Here at Camp Moosilauke, they've earned unofficial doctorates in boyhood.

"Boys measure everything they do on a sub-primal level of: Does this make me look weak?" said Bill, a 6-foot-5 gentle giant of a guy with a booming baritone voice. "We know that our job is to create resilient, happy, confident kids."

How do they do that? With this message underlined hour-by-hour.

"We expect you to be kind and to support your peers," Sabina said. "My father had a high priority to make this accessible

PHOTOS BY NICHOLAS PFOSI FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Bill McMahon prepared the canoes before taking campers out wake surfing on a recent sunny morning. Camp Moosilauke was founded in 1904.

Jacob Smith (right) and David Falis, longtime friends, hung out during a sunny morning at camp.

Carson Krulewitch (center) read while his fellow campers played Magic the Gathering during a rainy afternoon at Camp Moosilauke.

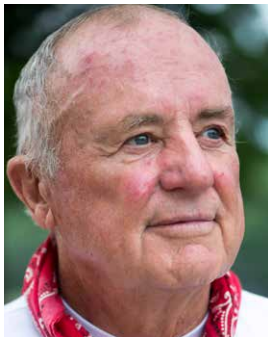
PHOTOS BY NICHOLAS PFOSI FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Campers headed down to dinner during a rainy afternoon at Camp Moosilauke.

to all types of boys. That makes you a better camp. It makes for a diverse community, a more empathetic community. A camp packed with white, rich kids is not a good camp.

This place is not inexpensive. With a camper-counselor ratio of 3 to 1, the 4½-week session that ends on Saturday costs upward of $7,000. Some 20 percent of the campers are children of color and more than 20 percent receive financial aid. Camp directors are working at increasing the more than $150,000 now provided each summer to kids who otherwise could not afford to be here.

"It's wonderful because they're getting to do things that I would never be able to afford," said Suzette Lozada of the Bronx, whose sons, Jacob, 15, and Omari, 11, are wrapping up their summertime camp experience this week. "It means a lot to them. There's a brotherhood there."



'I tell them what we're going to do is called conversation.'

PORT MILLER, *above, former director of Camp Moosilauke*

Claire Shipman, a former network correspondent now at work on a girls' book about confidence, said she obsessively searched for a summer camp that was not just some country club in the woods.

"I really, really wanted a place that was not full of spoiled, elitist, overprivileged kids," Shipman said. "I was not interested in an experience for my son that would encourage exclusivity, or clubbiness or entitlement."

Mission accomplished, said her son, Hugo Carney, 15, whose father is Jay Carney, a former White House press secretary.

When I sat on the lakefront with Hugo this week, he celebrated the camp's increasing diversity and the corny traditions he's come to treasure.

"We're all doing the same things," he said. "We're all eating the same meals. It's part of the camp spirit. Everything about this place creates a community that encourages us to be ourselves. Live your dreams. It's what happens here every single day — an experience that you'll remember for the rest of your lives. This camp has opened a door for me to try things that I never would have otherwise."

There is a poignancy about boys this age — a period of life that can be awkward and stressful in our over-programmed society of travel-squad basketball teams, tennis camps, math tutors, and SAT proficiency classes.

At lunch one day this week, I sat with Daniel, 10, from New York and 11- year-old Deacon from California. If the camp had an all-cute team, these kids would be its cocaptains.

They shared stories about unhappy lessons learned from organized sports back home, where Deacon said he was consigned to right field where fly balls dropped harmlessly around him, prompting sideline jeers.

Daniel, who was nodding along with his friend's story, piped up: "I wasn't any good, and I was very embarrassed."

And then, 125 kids were scampering across green fields and towards a spar-

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Camper Hugo Carney chanted with his fellow campers at dinner.

kling shoreline in pursuit of happiness without a scoreboard — or any embarrassment — in sight.

As they ran from the emptying mess hall, I stood there with Port Miller, who pointed out some of the camp luminaries in framed photographs now yellowed with age. There's a major league manager, a renowned conductor, and perhaps the greatest football coach of all time.

Miller points to Vince Lombardi, who led the Green Bay Packers to three straight NFL championships in the 1960s. Lombardi was a head counselor at Camp Moosilauke in the 1940s, later writing a letter of gratitude to Miller's father, who took over the place in 1938, thanking him for a job at a time when he dearly needed one.

These days, with the camp in the hands of his children and grandchildren, Port Miller has time for simpler tasks. He got a doctorate in education in 1973 from Columbia Teachers College, where his dissertation was on decision-making.

At camp, he'll take a bunch of boys trail-clearing in the morning. He'll show them how to use an ax or a saw. He'll point out where old Indian villages once thrived. He'll show them how to bend a sapling to mark a trail or the best way to catch a bullfrog. Or how, in a pinch, to repair a canoe with duct tape.

In other words, he's teaching boys how to be boys.

And then, as night settles in, it's time for another ghost story.

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