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A Rite of Passage

Camp Livingston continues tradition of hosting Madison students

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Jocelyn Partee, below, designs a T-shirt with a tie-dyed look at Camp Livingston. The shirt decorating was part crafts and part science, as leader Becky Schanding — a special education teacher who teaches crafts at the annual camp — taught the students to use drops of rubbing alcohol to make the permanent-marker colors run. (Staff photo by Peggy Vlerebome)

The first Madison schoolchildren who slipped their paddles into the lake at Camp Livingston are in their 40s now. The woods that hug the lake are 30 years older, but the cabins are pretty much the same. And although some of the amenities have changed, the experience of going to Camp Livingston is very much like it was that first year in 1976.

This year's sixth-grade campers came home Friday after spending three days and two nights, canoeing, fishing, hiking, playing camp games, performing at a talent show, doing crafts, hearing stories around a campfire and just having fun at the camp, which is about 30 miles east of Madison in Switzerland County.

There were 100 campers and 27 adults; the annual Camp Livingston experience for Madison students has a reputation for being fun for grownups, too, so a lot of them always volunteer as chaperones. At camp, they lead groups of students through the scheduled activities, eat their meals with them, and stay in the cabins with them at night.

Camp Livingston sometimes is called a "rite of passage" for Madison sixth-graders, and that was even more true before the sixth grades were moved to the junior high school. Before, it was a year-end activity before leaving elementary school.

If it's not as much of a rite of passage, it's still an enduring tradition. Some of the students at camp this year had heard about it from their parents, who had gone to Camp Livingston when they were in the sixth grade.

Sixth-grader Kelsey Block had heard about Camp Livingston from her mother, who wishes she could have gone with her daughter, as her mother did when she went.

"I had a blast," Kelsey's mother, Katie Jackson, said from her home in Madison. "I thought it was fun. I wish I could have went with her. It would have brought back some memories.

"I remember doing quite a bit of stuff — weather, fishing, canoeing, stories by the campfire."

She recalled the typical camp raid on the other gender's sleeping quarters. "My mom (Kim Block of Madison) was in on that," Jackson said. "She got in trouble."

The cabins have screened windows, so at the last planning meeting before going to camp Wednesday, parents were told to make sure their children had blankets and warm clothes. Jackson remembers the night weather.



"In the nighttime it got pretty chilly," she said. "There were two or three of us girls who would end up bunking in together for body heat." She was looking forward to hearing about her daughter's experiences.

Adding to the Camp Livingston tradition is that the same family has run the 680-acre camp for three generations. The late Martha and Dean Robinson, the parents of Madison Junior High School principal Mike Robinson, lived at the camp as the caretakers for a couple of decades. Then their daughter, Brenda Clark, ran it, and her son and his wife, Steve and Paula Clark, are the caretakers now. Steve Clark has a full-time job at North American Stainless, so Paula Clark does most of the work to keep the camp running.

Nancy Bear, principal at Eggleston Elementary School, started the class camping experience in Madison schools. The first was in the spring of 1975, when sixth-graders from E.O. Muncie where she taught went to King Center in Bardstown, Ky., she said. She had heard about the camp from teachers she met at Indiana University Southeast while working on her master's degree.

The camp closed after that summer, however, so the next year the Muncie teachers learned about Camp Livingston. In later years, schools would pair off for the trip, such as Eggleston and Dupont going at the same time.

"I was young and energetic and crazy at the time," said Bear, who is retiring in July. The other teachers went along with the idea.

"We all decided it would be a great tradition," Bear said.

Not all of the Madison sixth-graders went to Camp Livingston this year. The sixth grade classes are divided into groups at the beginning of the year. The Mariner group went to camp, but the teachers for the Trailblazer group decided to take them to St. Louis instead.

Besides the fun of camp, Bear said, she and the other adults found the cultural education interesting and informative. Camp Livingston is owned by the Jewish Federation of Cincinnati, and during the summer it is the regional camp for Jewish children and youths from Cincinnati, Columbus and Dayton, Ohio; Indianapolis; Louisville; and other parts of the Midwest. The kitchen is kosher year-round, and the camp manager, who is based in St. Louis, comes to Camp Livingston to explain to the Madison schoolchildren and their chaperones what this means. The campers also learn the meaning of signs in Hebrew in the dining hall and around the camp.

Last week, the camp manager was unable to be there when the newly arrived campers went to have lunch at the dining hall, so Clark gave them a brief explanation, and the manager would go into more detail that evening. Most of the children probably wouldn't notice any difference, Clark said before she spoke to them, but parents want to know why milk isn't served when there is meat on the menu. That's against Jewish dietary law, which requires meat and dairy foods to be prepared in separate kitchens and never mingled.

Clark said the camp kitchen serves such things as hamburgers but not cheeseburgers, and spaghetti and meat balls, but there is no cheese to sprinkle on the top.

Clark explained to the campers that they were having lunchmeat sandwiches, but not cheese, and the beverage was punch or water, not milk.

These days, students have to earn the privilege of going to Camp Livingston, rather than entire classes going. Teachers give play money to students in the sixth grade for various things as rewards, and take away play money for punishment. This is explained at the start of the school year, and they are told how much Camp Livingston will "cost" each of them.

"They have to earn \$3,000 doing work, following procedures and taking care of business," said teacher Reenie Getz, who organizes the trip. "They get \$25 just for coming to school."

A student with perfect attendance for the year would amass \$4,000 in play money, she said. Sixty of the students earned more than \$4,000 by being at school, doing more things right than wrong, and by earning bonuses, she said.

But play money was far from the minds of the sixth-graders as they bolted from the dining hall for an action-packed

afternoon.

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