

## Diversity at Girl Scout camp inspires adult community-building

By Audrey Van Gilder

I recently met a young Australian woman who was traveling around Europe and North America before making her way to North Carolina to start a job as a summer camp counselor. As a former Girl Scout camper and two-time camp counselor, I reacted excitedly and pestered her for details of the job. I assured the future counselor she'd have endless fun working at camp and wondered to myself why I felt so certain that was true. The simplest explanation? For counselors and campers alike, Girl Scout camp is a joyful time of personal growth. It can set in motion a life oriented around community-building.

Camp offers traditions and activities to not only engage girls during the summer, but which can also instill interests, habits and values that persist into adulthood. For example, arts and crafts was a big part of my weeks at camp. Inevitably, most crafts ended up gathering dust at home until they were thrown away in time for the next summer's creations. But as a result of camp, crafting became an inexpensive and productive hobby of mine as a teenager. (I'm still proud of the beautiful bags made from sewn-together Capri Sun pouches that I labored over and sold to friends!)

I was a camper from the mid-90s to the mid-2000s; these days, Girl Scout camp offers much more than arts and crafts. Campers today are exposed to and can develop appreciation for skills associated with science and technology in addition to the arts and outdoor activities. Who's to say what productive hobbies girls in 2019 might learn at camp?

Other habits learned at Girl Scout camp lasted beyond adolescence. My camp's directors and counselors prioritized outdoor education, with an emphasis on teaching respect for nature and for the indigenous Native American cultures connected to the land the camp now occupies. Frankly, I believe Girl Scout camp filled the sizeable hole in my public-school education regarding the Native peoples and history of northern Indiana.

Our songs and campfire stories referenced Native American legends. On hikes, we learned traditional uses for local flora and fauna. During overnight campouts, we stargazed and were taught how Native Americans used the stars to navigate and mark changes in the seasons.

Some people bemoan how easy access to technology has crowded out our familiarity with the natural world – what child needs to be able to read the weather when her phone displays the same information? Why learn how to identify poison ivy or nettles when a quick Google search can tell you what the dangerous plants look like? Girl Scout camp has outdoor awareness at its core and communicates the value of such knowledge in an authentic way.

When learned at a young age, respect for the land becomes ingrained. When I go on hikes as an adult, I remember to “take only pictures, leave only footprints.” I use an app on my phone called Native Lands that shows me the historic territories of Native American populations, wherever I am in North or South America. (My current Chicago region was once home to the Miami, Potawatomi and Peoria peoples.)

Girl Scout camp might be the place best-equipped to teach young girls about our shared connections to the Earth. Awareness of the natural world and the connections people have to land is valuable, no matter how technology changes the way we interact with the outdoors.

Also traceable to Girl Scout camp is the way I currently prioritize building community with other women, no matter our differences. I grew up near my Girl Scout camp near the homogenous suburbs of a small Indiana city – even so, the girls I met at camp were rarely like me and represented a diversity I learned to appreciate at a very young age. Identifying as a feminist in adulthood is natural for me due in part to what I experienced at Girl Scout camp: grouped together with girls with whom I shared little except for our gender (and later as a counselor put in charge of such groups), I had some of the best, most memorable and formative weeks of my childhood.

This must be why I reacted with such excitement – and nostalgia – when I met a young woman on the verge of becoming a camp counselor. Girl Scout camp is a special place, capable of shaping campers and counselors alike into leaders.

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