

Buffalo News Library

From boys to men, the path to camp is clear

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Sue Goodwin knew something had changed when she found her restless 10-year-old son on the deck listening to the rain. She said she noticed a certain peacefulness about him when he returned from Camp Pathfinder for the first time.

Now 16, Tim Goodwin, is going there as a counselor-in-training. The all-boys camp in Ontario's Algonquin Park draws mostly from Buffalo and Rochester.

Goodwin is just one of the many boys who have adopted the camp as a significant part of their lives, a nostalgic place where they return for reunions, fundraisers and family visits. In 1999, two former campers came together in an unlikely business partnership. When the previous Pathfinder owner stood up at a dinner party and asked who would buy the camp, Glenn Arthurs of Buffalo and Michael Sladden of Rochester had the same thought. They wanted to own it, but they didn't want to do it alone.

Sladden said that they sat under one of the camp's largest pine trees and decided to buy Pathfinder together, after being egged on by their wives. They had come to know each other through volunteering and supporting Pathfinder.

"Both my partner and I view us as torchbearers," Arthurs said. "We're just passing on a torch that has been around for 95 years."

Sladden is camp director and Pathfinder is his year-round job. Arthurs works as managing director at Smith Barney Buffalo and spends nearly every weekend in the summer up at camp.

"The first one is my real life job and my second one is my passion," Arthurs said, calling Pathfinder "a magical place."

Pathfinder is one of several camps in Algonquin Park and is located on a 15-acre island. It holds a little over 100 boys ages 7 to 15. Its signature program is canoe tripping, which allows campers to spend two to 24 days traveling through the water in old-fashioned wood and canvas canoes.

The camaraderie Arthurs and Sladden recall from their own experiences decades ago is something that brings boys back year after year, despite commitments to sports teams or conflicts with summer jobs.

"One reason why our camp can endure for 95 years is that something still resonates with families," Sladden said.

The 1940s-like environment is "a throwback to older times," he said. There is no electricity, and boys are told to leave their cell phones, iPods and video games at home.

"Boys don't have as many unstructured outdoor play activities as we did as kids," Sladden said. "A chance to connect with the natural world and get away from technology is more important than it's ever been."

Bill and Liz Savino of Eggertsville sent their son, Will, to Pathfinder after disliking his addiction to the computer.

After his first summer, Will immediately wanted to go back. Now he will be returning for his seventh year, this time as a counselor-in-training.

"If it weren't this wonderful, we wouldn't give up our son for two months," Bill Savino said, adding that his son has met "good, solid kids" through Pathfinder. At Pathfinder, older campers sleep on wooden platform tents and younger ones sleep in cabins. On Sundays, they take soap baths, write a letter to their parents, attend a nondenominational chapel talk and eat a big Sunday dinner. They go on treasure hunts and scream "Trippers!" when they see canoes coming or leaving.

When out of their comfort zone, far from TV and video games, the boys develop a sense of confidence, Sladden said. They also have a newfound appreciation for the environment and are less likely to be wasteful, he said.

Now, Sladden said, he wonders who will carry on the 95-year-old camp's legacy and scans the lineups of campers at daily flag ceremonies.

"We keep looking at the 11- and 12-year-olds and wondering which one of them will be the next owner," he said.

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