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Embracing the Larger Culture

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At all levels of camp, people of color are dramatically underrepresented: in ownership, directorship, staffing, and as campers. This circumstance is unacceptable, especially because, within a generation, the majority of the U.S. population will be of color. According to U.S. Census projections, “minorities,” now roughly one-third of the U.S. population, are expected to become the majority in 2042, with the nation projected to be 54 percent “minority” in 2050. By 2023, minorities will comprise more than half of all children. The non-Hispanic, single-race white population is projected to comprise 46 percent of the total population in 2050, down from 66 percent in 2008. Meanwhile, the Hispanic population is projected to nearly triple, from 46.7 million to 132.8 million during the 2008-2050 period. Its share of the nation’s total population is projected to double, from 15 percent to 30 percent. Thus, nearly one in three U.S. residents would be Hispanic. The black population is projected to increase from 14 percent of the population in 2008, to 15 percent in 2050. The Asian population share is expected to rise from 5.1 percent to 9.2 percent. American Natives are projected to rise from 1.6 to 2 percent of the total population. The Pacific Islander population is expected to more than double. The number of people who identify themselves as bi-racial is projected to more than triple. In 2050, the nation’s population of children is expected to be 62 percent minority, up from 44 percent today. Thirty-nine percent are projected to be Hispanic (up from 22 percent in 2008), and 38 percent are projected to be single-race, non-Hispanic white (down from 56 percent in 2008) (2008 U.S. Census Bureau).

Lack of diversity in camp inhibits the broader camp field from providing universal access to quality experiences. It also affects the bottom line; if you’re maintaining a business model that does not respond to the needs of a large client pool, you will soon be out of business or competing for a shrinking share of a small pie. As camp professionals, we must articulate the value of camp to a broader audience, and serve it appropriately — instead of struggling with a twentieth century problem of serving the same narrow population by doing the same narrow traditional activities. We can and must properly support diversity.

In organized camping, children should see diverse models in fellow campers, staff, and ownership. For now, those models are not prevalent. In the U.S., there seems to be only one Black-owned private residential camp based upon information from major camp associations.

The overwhelming majority of camp directors and campers is Caucasian. A 2007 American Camp Association (ACA) nationwide study reveals that of over 500 respondent accredited camps, 95 percent of camp directors are Caucasian, with less than 0.5 percent black, less than 0.5 percent Asian, less than 1 percent Native American (2007 American Camp Association). A 2003 ACA Camp Industry Survey of Residential Camps, compared with U.S. census data, shows that White Americans comprise almost 90 percent of residential campers at independent, for-profit camps (and almost 80 percent overall), despite being less than 75 percent of the U.S. population (2003 American Camp Association).

Compared to the general population, and despite the life-enhancing benefits that camp offers, children of color are sadly underrepresented. The ACA Camp Industry Survey when compared with U.S. census data, also indicated at independent, for-profit camps, Black Americans are 3.7 percent of the camper population (69 percent below the population share); Hispanics 3.6 percent (75 percent under); Asian or Pacific Islander 2.2 percent (51 percent under); Bi-racial or mixed race 1.4 percent (26 percent under); and Native American 0.0 percent (infinitely under).

I first became involved in camp as a tennis pro at a predominantly Jewish girls summer camp. It was an excellent experience; I returned there for many summers, having fallen in love with camp's awesome power to positively influence children. But as I became more involved in the camp field, I realized that most camps were homogenous — with very few intentionally attracting, supporting, and maintaining a diverse camper base. Reacting to that, after many years of effort, Camp Kupugani came to fruition. At Kupugani, girls of different cultures and backgrounds come together for fun and to learn empowerment and social intelligence skills. We explore inter-cultural issues, while simultaneously fostering friendship and teamwork. We believe that living, playing, and working together is the best way to instill cross-cultural bonds of friendship and trust. Kupugani girls enjoy activities like rock climbing, river walking, canoeing, playing under waterfalls, and night hikes under the stars, plus carefully designed group activities and games so that fun and personal growth coincide.

Black, White, Latinas, Arab-Americans, Asian-Americans, first-generation immigrants, multiple-generation immigrants, biracial adoptees — girls from different towns, cities, suburbs, states, and countries — each bring unique biases and preconceptions to camp. Even as we address issues of difference with campers open to tackling those issues, it can still be difficult to fully understand one another. Nevertheless, with activities like creating “I Am From” poetry, where the girls consider things about themselves with which they most strongly identify — often race or ethnicity, language, or family — they begin to understand the diversity brought by each member of the community. Other activities force us to address, recognize, and let go of stereotypes.

Our Camp Kupugani mission is to expose children of varied backgrounds and ethnicities to each other in a residential camp setting. This corresponds with the ACA's 20/20 Vision: we can broaden how camps contribute to positive child and youth development in an expanding national and global community. To do so, we must foster camp environments where campers of color feel supported at their camp by seeing the following: other campers of color, strong role models as staff, and themselves as potential owners and directors.

Any article purporting to offer tools to increase diversity or



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reflects diversity.**

representation of people of color risks making stereotypical assumptions. Let's first acknowledge that no magic tool works with everyone, regardless of culture, background, or ethnicity. There is a rich variety in how people of any background "define" themselves. Just as all white people aren't the same — with divergent backgrounds and mindsets — the same is true for people of other groups. There may be even more divergence in backgrounds of people of color, with varied countries of origin, generational span within their adopted country, religious background, and the like. That said, this article raises some broad strategies that may apply to a significant cross-section of folks of color.

Camp families — whether "traditional" (families with parents who went to camp, or who have friends, neighbors, or community members who did) or "non-traditional" (families without significant camp experience) — weigh the prospective costs and benefits when contemplating sending a child to camp. All good parents are concerned about their children's safety. However, traditional camper parents have more direct knowledge of the advantages of camp, so their cost-benefit analysis tilts relatively easily towards camp attendance. For non-traditional parents, going to camp has not been part of their community culture. Camps must more intentionally communicate to these parents the significant benefits of the camp experience and allay concerns about safety.

Defining Safety

In defining safety when talking to non-traditional camp parents, tangibly define it. Safety is both physical and emotional; both factors need to be addressed to the prospective parent. Regarding physical safety, emphasize your camp's safeguards regarding hiring — i.e., background and reference checks, and in-person interviews of new employees — and against physical intrusion by strangers. Also emphasize your systemic protections against camper-camper problems. Regarding emotional safety, highlight how your camp minimizes homesickness and the potential

of bullying, while facilitating your campers' emotional development.

Explaining the ACA-accreditation process can further effectively address safety concerns. Share how accreditation evinces your camp's commitment to a safe and nurturing environment and assures that camp practices have been measured against national standards — and how ACA standards are those of the camp industry. These all can persuasively demonstrate your commitment to safety and show that your camp can be trusted to care for parents' most precious assets.

Cultural Relevancy

Demonstrate that your camp is culturally relevant. Show that you understand the values, lifestyles, and behaviors that parents are trying to promote. Confirm that you can provide campers with a culturally appropriate sense of comfort.

Cultural relevancy is a difficult challenge, as it requires an individuated approach. For each prospective family, we try to assess the driving motivator to go to camp. For some, we stress how character building enhances future success; for others, we emphasize social development; for yet others, it's accentuating assimilation into broader American culture; and for others, the opposite — helping them safely celebrate and assert individuality. For some, it might be brainstorming how the family will cope with the temporary loss of the camper, who may well be the family's main translator or assistant caregiver. Again, there's no magic answer; it takes time, thought, and effort to learn what individual families think is best and to emphasize how our camp can help.

Demonstrate Modeling

Demonstrate modeling by having staff of color. For many families, we ease the transition to camp by showing that there will be others who look, talk, or act like them. If you don't have, or can't find diverse staff, institute systems to recruit and develop a staff that reflects diversity.

Inviting one or two token campers of color into an otherwise homogenous camp program does not complete your diversity work; developing relevant support systems is vital, so that non-traditional campers don't feel alone and unsupported. As Black owners, we find that other Black-Americans find it easy to connect with us, whether as potential staff or potential camp families.

With other people of color, we can share the concerns of navigating a predominantly white culture. With white families or traditional camp families, our modeling is of experienced camp professionals who can communicate the various benefits of our camp.

Promote and Support Diversity

Ensure that your camp programming promotes and supports diversity. Assimilation to the dominant culture should not be the goal — that only marginalizes those to whom you are trying to reach out.

Our program is quite intentional in addressing issues of difference. Although avoiding such issues might make short-term camp "easier" — we could just do fun, traditional camp activities all day long — we would miss opportunities to change our world for the better. We have to be wary that, as problems emerge and difficult conversations happen, we facilitate them in an emotionally safe space. By learning and practicing conflict resolution techniques, the girls express their feelings in a non-confrontational manner. This gives us a critical tool for moving forward as individuals and as a caring community. Managed conflict is not a sign that things aren't going well, but actually, that things are just getting better; we're addressing tough issues safely and productively.

Communication

Establish relevant lines of communication. Reaching non-traditional campers mandates expanding your communications repertoire. Be creative, especially when cultural barriers may inhibit getting your message across. Some non-traditional parents assert, "I love my child, so why would I send her away?"

We need to communicate that it's precisely *because* they love their child why they should give her an opportunity for the human connections, awareness of the natural world, independence, and character development that only a quality camp experience can provide.

It can sometimes be challenging to foster word-of-mouth promotion where there is a limited history of attracting certain camper demographics . . . how do we create word-of-mouth beginning with a base of zero? For example, in our first season, we were underrepresented regarding Hispanic and Asian girls, despite trying different types

continued on page 32

of outreach to members of those broad communities. In our second season, by continuing to foster relationships with specific communities, we were able to bring those relative percentages up to match or exceed those of the general population. Establishing positive word-of-mouth support didn't necessarily mean direct camp experience, but also stemmed from affirmative experiences with camp administration and during non-camp interactions.

In communicating the camp message to non-traditional campers, a useful framework in deciding the kind of tools that may suit your camp is to assess those with universal application and those suited to pre-camp, during camp, and post-camp communications.

Throughout the Process

Bilingual staff can greatly facilitate communication with people whose first language is not English. There are also online translation programs that can help you communicate via e-mail.

Sadly, despite having a retired Spanish professor as a father, I stubbornly refused as a child to learn Spanish, and regret it to this day! I have a rudimentary understanding but otherwise have to recruit bilingual staff so that campers and parents who speak predominantly Spanish can communicate directly in their language of choice. Additionally, I've used Google® translator www.translate.google.com/translate_t# to facilitate e-mail communications with Spanish-speaking parents. Cultural awareness also motivates me to speak to each parent as an individual — across professions and economic circumstances, navigating race-dependent conditions where a parent might be more comfortable with certain slang usage, and being aware of language issues.

Pre-Camp Communications

When folks are relatively amenable to hearing the camp message, some promotional avenues that can help are to develop bilingual promotional materials like Web site pages, brochures, and DVDs. You can also use targeted radio or print ads.

We haven't yet developed a completely bilingual Web site or brochure, but re-evaluate the prospect quarterly. We have advertised on a radio station that targets a predominantly Black-American audience, and others that target progressive audiences.

Web Resources

Visit the following Web sites for examples of programs doing excellent work in the field of social justice and diversity:

Mosaic Project, www.mosaicproject.org

Passages Northwest, www.passagesnw.org

Multiethnic Education Program, www.multiethniceducation.org

When people aren't necessarily ready to hear the camp message, a slower build requires a more labor-intensive approach tapping into non-traditional camper bases. You can collaborate with community partners with established relationships with people of color. You can partner with schools or parent associations. You can offer family weekends. You can offer scholarships or contests, and organize camp presentations. You can partner with parents who can serve as camp volunteers.

As a camp, we have reached out to a variety of organizations, with varied levels of success. We have established relationships with Boys and Girls Clubs, regional YWCAs, charter schools that predominantly serve students of color, business groups and social networks of color, and others. This type of relationship building doesn't always provide instant gratification, but has borne fruit over time.

Once you have successfully recruited non-traditional parents to your camp, you need to ensure their comfort, which in turn eases their camper's transition to camp, provides for a better camp experience, and leads to that all important positive word-of-mouth. There must be extensive director-parent communication. You're not facilitating the pejorative "helicopter parent" syndrome (a parent paying such close attention to a child's experience that child development is inhibited); you're exposing the benefits of camp to people who would otherwise be reluctant to help evolve the camp culture.

For us, extensive communication with parents is fun and life-affirming. It's great to evolve relationships from reluctant consideration of camp, to camp registration, to raves about how camp changed their child for the better.

During Camp Communications

Here's where difficult decisions arise. Many camps have long-standing policies

prohibiting direct parent-child communication. Since many non-traditional parents find it unfathomable to send a child away to spend a week or two with people they don't know, it can seem crazy to that parent to be told that they can't communicate with their child. There are a few potential solutions. You can work hard to establish a level of confidence in your judgment and experience so that they will trust that such parent-child communication may inhibit their child's growth. Alternatively, you might allow parents to stay in touch with their children — perhaps allowing incoming calls during meal times, or having computers available for occasional e-mails home. You might contemplate a modified "open camp" policy, where first-time camp parents can drop in and see for themselves that their child is okay.

Although we continually evaluate our program, we have so far chosen to not allow direct parent-child communication during camp; we encourage the exchange of written letters and allow incoming parent e-mails. For us, the trust established before camp, combined with our nurturing of parents who need a little more support, gives our parents the confidence to entrust their child to us. We also post hundreds of pictures daily, so that parents can see for themselves their daughters' smiling faces.

Post-Camp Communications

Post-camp communications provide a great opportunity to continue building on a good camp experience and really build positive word-of-mouth. The director who calls just to say hi and see how a child is doing shows how the camp family can be integrated with the home family. You can also consider counselor-parent communication, especially if you have bilingual staff and non-English speaking parents. You can ponder counselor-camper communication.

As with the pre- and during camp communication, the post-camp follow-up is

heart-warming, allowing us the fantastic honor of being surrogate parents sharing in the life of our campers.

None of this is easy. Intentionally recruiting diverse staff and campers poses significant challenges, including investing more time and effort than just doing the same old, same old. It's hard to establish the support systems and intentionality in staffing and programming to further a mission of enhancing diversity. But it's worth it. Opening up the camp experience so that all children have the opportunity to go to camp and feel supported is a momentous reward of intentionality.

Because we've been intentionally diverse, from Kupugani campers I've learned that we can see and move beyond stereotypes. By exposing children to folks of other cultures and backgrounds, we can broaden their choices beyond defining their community based strictly on skin color or cultural background. They can celebrate their ethnic background while embracing the larger culture. They can revel in the amazing economic and ethnic diversity of folks who call America home. The "land of opportunity" can offer, as it does at camp, the chance to connect in a meaningful way with a wide variety of folks. As camps in general, we can't be satisfied with the status quo or status slow; it's time to move forward. To get to 20/20, we must act now.

Acknowledgements

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Photos on pages 28 and 29 courtesy of Camp Kupugani, Leaf River, Illinois.

Systems to Recruit and Develop Diverse Staff

- **Commit to diversity from the top down.** Leadership must understand why hiring diverse staff will ultimately benefit the entire camp community. Diversity must be critical, not an "it would be nice if . . ." Frame diversity as an essential component of camp excellence and define clearly measurable goals regarding diversity.
- **Diversify search committee.** Include Caucasian and staff members of color on your hiring committee. If you have limited diversity on your staff, bring in diverse community members.
- **Broaden your candidate pool.** People tend to hire those who resemble them. Transcend your typical networks by not relying on generic camp job sites/networks and finding channels into target communities. If you're serious about diversity, do not start interviewing before getting significant numbers of diverse candidates in the initial pool.
- **Reach students of color.** Recruit at learning institutions where a majority of the students are of color. Partner with professors or career services heads. Volunteer to do presentations or seminars.
- **Impress candidates of color.** Recognize that they may need to be aggressively "courted" as you would any other outstanding candidate. They need to feel truly welcome. If you have staff of color (who are not part of the search committee), have them meet informally with candidates to give them a sense of the camp.
- **Emphasize skills.** In your job descriptions, emphasize required skills over academic degrees or camp experience that otherwise-qualified candidates lack. Include details that might be attractive to diverse applicants. For example, if looking for bilingual staff, make key languages a job requirement of the job something that — like camp/activity/facilitation experience — influences the staff salary scale.
- **Watch for "fit."** Try not to make your candidates "fit" into your existing camp structure or necessarily seek a person who will not change the status quo. People of color, and most particularly, those from different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds may be presumed not to "fit" as well as Caucasian candidates. Try to show all candidates that they WILL fit, and then let them decide for themselves.
- **Be self-critical.** Examine continually whether candidate judgments are being affected by subjective factors, stereotypes, or other assumptions.
- **Use varied learning styles.** Use visual, verbal, and kinesthetic learning styles in the interview and training process.
- **Encourage a camp culture respecting difference.** Accept variations in professional appearance (i.e., tattoos, piercings, dyed hair, braids, etc.). Include in both your supervisor-employee and employee-supervisor evaluations how each addresses diversity. Encourage a camp culture where employees (and campers) feel comfortable discussing difference.

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