

Summer camp owners break color barrier

Camp White Eagle is a rare summer camp—the only private, residential summer camp facility in the United States with black owners. Kevin Gordon and his wife Natasha Jackson have recently acquired Camp White Eagle, a camp two hours west of Chicago.

Gordon and Jackson will offer a two-week multicultural session for girls ages 7-12, called Camp Kupugani at Camp White Eagle, from June 24 to July 7, 2007. This multicultural program is unique; girls of different cultures and backgrounds come together for fun and to learn empowerment and social intelligence skills. Camp White Eagle is accredited by the American Camp Association (ACA), which verifies that the camp has complied with up to 300 standards for health, safety, and program quality.

During a successful pilot session last summer, the couple witnessed how girls of varied backgrounds can live, play, and work together, instilling bonds of friendship and trust. “Our mission-combined with specially recruiting diverse campers and counselors, plus our specialized program—opens up camp to girls who otherwise couldn’t go and feel supported,” said Gordon.

Jackson, a grade school teacher, emphasized that the girls have fun while learning critical social lessons. “They enjoy rock climbing, river walking, playing under waterfalls, and night hikes under the stars. Because of carefully-designed group activities and games, fun and personal growth coincide.”

Gordie Kaplan, Executive

Director of the ACA-Illinois section, says that such a camp has been long needed. “Camp Kupugani fills a void. I can’t think of another camp with that type of focus.”

“When I heard about the program being offered for a full session this summer, I knew I wanted my daughter to attend,” said Ellen Pinkham of Chicago. “In our diverse society, I didn’t want her to miss out on a chance to have fun while enhancing her social skills.” A Harvard University graduate in psychology and the Canadian-born son of Jamaican immigrants, Gordon has been in organized camping since 1990, when he first worked at a Wisconsin girls camp. That camp served a predominantly Jewish population, and Gordon soon discovered that most camps were similarly non-diverse and resolved to someday start a multicultural camp. “I was excited to see how valuable camp was for kids who were able to attend, but amazed that everyone was so similar,” Gordon explains. “I knew then that we needed a camp where kids could move beyond locked-in social groups, and help them develop the skills to deal with a variety of folks.”

Becoming pioneering black camp owners was not easy. After trying in vain for ten years to fund a not-for-profit camp, the couple realized that it would happen only by doing it on their own. To gain those finances, Gordon attended the University of California-Berkeley School of Law and worked as an attorney for a prestigious law firm. During this time, the couple continued to gain further camp experience



Girls have fun mixing it up at the Camp Kupugani pilot session. Photo: Kim Goldsmith

working at programs from Pennsylvania to California.

Lara Mendel, director of the Mosaic Project, a pioneering outdoor education program in California, which brings together school classes of different backgrounds, said, “I was amazed by the responsibility and experience Natasha and Kevin showed when they worked here. Their program is sorely needed to help bring girls together.”

Even after the couple had their financing in place, it remained difficult to break into the insular world of camps. Unlike houses, which are generally available on an open market, no such market for camps exists. The couple soon found that many camps were owned by private families who kept them

in their families for generation after generation. Indeed, for a person of color to even direct—much less own—a residential camp is rare: a 2007 ACA nationwide study reveals that, of over 500 respondent accredited camps, less than 1% of directors are black, and 95% are Caucasian.

After years of searching, the couple found Gary and Sue Devore, former owners of Camp White Eagle, whose daughter did not want to continue the family business. Prevailing over scores of interested potential buyers, the couple won over the Devores with their multicultural camp idea. The 120-acre Camp White Eagle was founded in 1951; Gordon and Jackson are only its third owners.

For more information about Camp Kupugani at Camp White



Camp White Eagle is that rare summer camp; it is owned and operated by people of color. Photo: Nils Juul-Hansen

Eagle, the camp’s Friends and Family Camps during each of the last two weeks of August 2007, or the camp’s rental or retreat program, people can contact the camp

at 866-471-4616, or visit the camp’s Web site at www.campkupugani.com.