

'Fun... Friends... Forever'

CAMP LAURELWOOD OFFERS GRANTS TO FIRST-TIME CAMPERS

By Stacey Dresner

MADISON – The names of campers from years past used to cover the walls of some of the bunks at Camp Laurelwood in Madison.

But in recent years this nostalgic graffiti has been covered up with clean coats of paint as part of a campaign to refurbish the 70-year-old overnight camp.

"For a lot of the alumni this was a traumatic experience because we ended up painting over years and generations of graffiti. Their names are no longer displayed on the walls," chuckled Frank McCarthy, president of Camp Laurelwood. "Nonetheless, clearly it was a huge improvement in the look of the bunks."

Now, with some help from alumni and community donors, as well as the Harold Grinspoon Foundation in Springfield, Mass., Camp Laurelwood, the only Jewish community overnight camp in Connecticut, is doing even more to improve its grounds and to recruit new campers.

As part of its recruitment drive, Camp Laurelwood is offering a series of grants to first-time campers who enroll in the camp for the 2008 summer session.

The "Fun. Friends. Forever" campaign will offer one-time grants of \$1,500 for new campers who enroll at Camp Laurelwood for the entire summer session. A grant of \$1,000 will go to first-time campers who enroll for a one-month session, and a \$500 grant will go to first-time campers attending for two weeks.

The grants were made possible through donations by alumni, donors from the local Jewish community, and a matching grant made to the camp by the Harold Grinspoon Foundation.

The Grinspoon Foundation, through its Grinspoon Institute for Jewish Philanthropy, has donated close to \$10 million in services and matching grants to Jewish non-profit overnight camps around the country in the past two years.

"Along with partners in the camping world, we want to transform Jewish camping from an activity for a minority of children to being 'the place to be' for Jewish children and pre-teens," said Susan Kline, director of the Institute. "To do this, we have to make Jewish camps competitive with all the other summer options for kids."

By raising \$200,000 through alumni and local community donors, Camp Laurelwood was able to access the addi-



Tennis is one of the many fun activities at Camp Laurelwood.

tional funds from the Grinspoon Foundation to the sum of around \$60,000. In all, the camp has raised \$300,000 which is going toward the first-camper incentive program as well as for continued physical improvements to the camp.

Daniel Papermaster of West Hartford, a board member and vice president of Camp Laurelwood, said that by contributing the original \$200,000 to the camp, alumni and local Jewish community donors have decided that "Camp Laurelwood is an important resource for the Jewish community of Connecticut."

"We want to get more kids to experience Camp Laurelwood," he continued. "The fact is that we have the capacity for these kids, and it is a great camp. But there are a lot of choices out there for folks, and we want to try to encourage people to check out Laurelwood."

A HIDDEN GEM

Camp Laurelwood had been working on improvements even before this year's recruitment and marketing push.

"The last five years our focus has been recruitment and renovation and getting the word out," said Ruth Ann Ornstein, executive director of Laurelwood. "We have this hidden gem here in Madison, Connecticut and we weren't doing the greatest job of letting everybody know we are here. The last five years have been dedicated to recruiting – and our numbers continuously

keep going up every year – and retention and we keep putting money back into the camp site. The excitement is starting to build."

"Laurelwood has been in a process of kind of reinventing itself over the last few years," agreed McCarthy. "We really started on a concerted effort to improve our grounds, to improve the general appearance of the camp to just make it a much nicer place."

McCarthy said that some of the improvements were funded through the sale of some of the camp's excess land – acreage that was not being used.

Improvements to the camp over the last few years include upgrading the camp's bunks by painting the walls, installing new electrical systems, adding new beds, even refurbishing the wooden floors.

The camp also has a new septic system and a new water supply system, roofs and shower halls have been fixed, and the basketball courts have been repaired.

McCarthy said that through the camp's capital improvement budget they will continue to select new refurbishment projects to work on each year.

All of this hard work is dedicated to the ultimate goal of increasing enrollment.

"Unfortunately there had been declining enrollment since the early to mid-90s. Clearly the enrollment was not what it had been in the past," McCarthy said.

But Ornstein said that enrollment has steadily grown in the past five years. Last summer, there was a healthy enrollment of 200 campers. With the first-time incentive grants, the goal is to sign up 75 new campers for next summer.

Ornstein said that 80 percent of Laurelwood's campers live in Connecticut with the largest number coming from the New Haven area. The rest of the kids come from West Hartford and Fairfield.

The goal is now to attract campers from other areas. "We are doing a camp fair in the Springfield area and one in Rhode Island," Ornstein said.

She said that Laurelwood's competitors are those camps that are affiliated with a movement, like the Conservative Camp Ramah and Reform Camp Eisner, which get lots of endorsements from synagogues and rabbis.

Laurelwood is not affiliated with a synagogue movement, but it has a kosher kitchen, it keeps Shabbat and has Friday



A camper challenges himself on the high ropes course.



Swimming is part of the fun at Camp Laurelwood.



Camp Laurelwood boasts two lakes.

night, Saturday morning and Saturday evening services which are camper-led.

POSITIVE JEWISH IDENTITIES

McCarthy became involved in Camp Laurelwood when his two now-adult children attended. A Catholic, McCarthy and his wife Arline, who is Jewish, decided early on to raise their children in the Jewish faith.

Sending them to Laurelwood was just one way they found to instill in their children Jewish values.

Papermaster, who attended Camp Laurelwood as a child and who now sends his two children -- Nathan, 13, and Molly, 11 – to Laurelwood still has fond memories of his days at camp, and he says that those years helped form his Jewish identity.

"I believe in Jewish camping," said Papermaster. "If you look at the writings of Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, he talks about three fundamental things that develop a positive Jewish identity in young people: Jewish day schools, Jewish camping experiences and going to Israel. And that is what it is all about. As a Jewish community, I think we need to be focusing on those three things."

"Camps are not bricks and mortar. Camps are all about developing a positive Jewish identity and it is the only place, outside of Israel, where a child can really understand what it is like to be in the majority, while at the same time, having an experience which can be a life-changing event where you develop life-long relationships."

CAMP LAURELWOOD FACTS

Location: 463 Summer Hill Road, Madison, CT

Phone: (203) 421-3736 **Email:** info@camplaurelwood.org

Description: Jewish coed residential camp

Ages: Children, ages 7 – 15

Size: 140 wooded acres.

Accreditation: American Camping Association (ACA) and State of Connecticut

History:

Founded as a day camp by the Women's Assembly (the women's auxiliary of the Young Men's Hebrew Association now the JCC of New Haven.) in 1931 in a shed on Double Beach in East Haven. During the 30s the camp became an overnight camp and in 1937 land was purchased for a larger camp in North Madison. It was named Camp Laurelwood for the abundance of laurel in the area.

Activities:

Land sports, swimming, basketball, floor hockey, tennis, computers, dance, drama, arts and crafts, ceramics, high ropes, biking, boating, fishing, nature, day trips and overnights.

Amenities:

Two swimming pools, basketball courts, tennis courts, two lakes (a 20-acre lake for boating and a 10-acre lake for fishing) indoor facility and outdoor chuppah for activities on rainy days.