

Farm And Wilderness Changes With Times But, Values Remain The Same

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PLYMOUTH — In a time when many summer camps are feeling the economic pinch as well as increasing parental demands, Plymouth's Farm and Wilderness Camps are holding strong. Founded in 1939, The Farm and Wilderness Camp Foundation situated near the Woodward reservoir in Plymouth, Vermont has changed with the times, but its values are strikingly similar to the day it started.

"It is amazing how similar things are to '39. What has changed is the intentions and goals of what we are doing," said Pieter Bohen, Executive Director of Farm and Wilderness.

After a historically low population in 2002, Farm and Wilderness is now at the top of their game with the highest enrollment in over a decade. "We've had a steady increase for the past five years," he said. In Bohen's theory, poor economic conditions can actually affect summer camps in a positive way.

"We were founded during the depression. In hard times people get focused on what values they're passing on to their children," said Bohen about the camp's success in this recessionary time.

Farm and Wilderness runs seven camps including a day camp called Barn Camp. The other camps are resident camps that focus on specific age groups as well as gender groups such as the Indian Brook for girls 9-14. The camps focus on summer activities such as hiking, camping, kayaking, and canoeing, but also have large service element as well. All campers are involved with other local organic farms like the Stonefield Farm in Orwell, VT and are expected to help out in a number of ways. The service element of the camps has been a part of Farm and Wilderness since Bohen can remember.

Back in 1981, Bohen was a camper himself and then a counselor the following year. He gives credit to Farm and Wilderness for his success with other non-profit organizations such as Earth Corps and Cascade Land conservatory. "The service aspect helps them gain perspective and see the importance of local farms, buying local as well as decreasing our carbon footprint," said Bohen. With the focus on farming skills, come lessons on diet and nutrition, an impressive camp trait for parents.

In 1995, Kate O'Neill moved herself and her three young children from New Jersey to start a job at the Farm and Wilderness camp in Plymouth, VT she had no idea the impact that it would have on her family. After her first job as a swim instructor, she moved on to waterfront director and eventually became the assistant director. O'Neill, a Bridgewater resident does not work for the camp now but her sons, Matteo and Sean 19, and daughter Indi 16, are all counselors at the camp over a decade later. During the years O'Neill spent working at the camp her children attended many of the six camps including the Barn Day Camp, the Saltash Mountain camp and the Questers camp.

"A really big focus of the camp is to work, play and grow together as a community and now they really understand what that means and the value of that," said O'Neill about the positive impact

Farm and Wilderness camps have had on her children.

Bohen claims that one of the major influences on summer camps to day are parental expectations. As he sees it, parents want more than activities by the lake they want their children to come away with a new or honed abilities. "Parental expectation and what skill set they will come home with that is what has really grown," said Bohem. For Bohem it is about meeting those needs as well as how campers take those needs out into their community. Keeping up high standards for parents, staff and campers led to the camp's accreditation by the American Camping Association.

For O'Neill, her concern as a parent was not as centered around her children learning new skills as much as a camp understanding their emotional and physical needs. "Many Parents want to know that someone is aware of their child's needs and that they are not disappearing into the mix," said O'Neill. O'Neill went on to describe the skills that her children still use today such as leadership and outdoor navigation skills.

It is crucial for Farm and Wilderness to meet the desires of parents as they are often coming from a distance to create a new experience for their children. Bohem estimates that about 86 percent of campers are not from Vermont. "Most campers are coming from New York, Philly, Boston, and DC," explained Bohem who went on to say, "But we are very focused on serving local families." A greater percentage of Vermont families are choosing the Farm and Wilderness Barn Camp where a bus will pick Woodstock area children up right at the Woodstock Elementary School for a fee. The Farm and Wilderness Barn Camp has a 40:60 ratio of Vermont kids to out of state and will run parents about \$940.

"Our goal is to create a sane and just world for campers as well as train them in community based leadership," said Bohem. Although Bohem and O'Neil would like to see more of a local representation at the Farm and Wilderness Camps they are proud of its history and hopeful for its future.