



June 6, 2004

9/11 RECOVERY; Camps help kids cope with loss and trauma

BY DEBORAH HIRSCH
STAFF WRITER

It took some heavy coaxing for Stacey Roy to convince her two daughters to leave their Massapequa Park home for summer camp two years ago.

Less than a year had passed since their father, New York City police Sgt. Timothy Alan Roy, responded to the World Trade Center attacks on Sept. 11, 2001 and never came home. "They had a hard time accepting that if I went away, I might disappear, too," Stacey Roy said.

But America's Camp, a free week-long camp in Massachusetts for children who lost family during the attacks, quickly distracted them from those fears, she said. In that first summer following Sept. 11, America's Camp and at least five other camps opened on the East Coast to help children cope with the trauma of the terrorist attacks.

However, relatively few children were ready to leave their remaining family. With the event still fresh in the public's mind, camp directors said funding and volunteer staff were more readily available at first than were children.

Now, with more distance from the horror of that day, enrollment is higher than ever and continuing to grow. Camp directors said passing time may have contributed to the increased attendance by giving families who shared the same anxieties as the Roys a chance to become more comfortable being apart.

When Maggie McDonnell of Wantagh first sent her daughter Katie, 11, to camp in 2002, she even vacationed near the campground in Massachusetts to stay close. "I don't know who was crying first, her or me," Maggie McDonnell said. By the end of the week, though, she said, Katie "was a different kid."

Tricia Tompkinson of Staten Island sent her two kids to Camp Haze, created in honor of trade center victim Scott Hazelcorn at a site where he had attended camps as a child in upstate Monticello. "They made a lot of friends that they can speak to about what happened," she said.

Roy's daughter, Brittney, 10, is getting ready for her third session at America's Camp. "I just enjoy having fun and making new friends and all the good things that we get to do there," Brittney Roy said. (continued)

Stacey Roy added, "Instead of going through 'Why me?' and kind of feeling

sorry for themselves, it made them feel like there were hundreds of children like them."

About 200 children, including 60 from Long Island, have registered for this summer's session of America's Camp, which also includes children who lost family any time while on police or fire department duty. The camp has more than doubled its size since it started in 2002.

Andy Cole, one of the directors, said campers find it liberating to not stand out as "that kid who lost a parent." Over the years, the camps have also been building reputations through Sept. 11 advocacy organizations and word-of-mouth. And experts say more kids could be registering simply because there's still a need for a place where they can feel safe discussing war, terrorism or loss.

"You don't think that September 11 still bothers kids but even at school they 'll draw pictures of the Twin Towers, it's still bothering them," said Jay Westerlund, 24, a counselor for New Ground Day Camp at Ascension Lutheran Church in Deer Park. New Ground, a series of Christian camps hosted at churches throughout New York and New Jersey, was set up in response to Sept. 11, but it's for all children, not just those who lost parents in the attacks.

Aside from counseling sessions, the scene at Ascension seems like any day camp. Some say that merely having fun has its own value. Jed Dorfman of Piermont, N.H., who founded America's Camp with two other camp directors, said one parent told him she hadn't seen her daughter smile in nine months - even buying her a horse didn't work - but in photos on the camp Web site she looked "like she's glowing."

Dorfman also recalled overhearing a 13-year-old boy on the phone describe a campfire to his mother. Dorfman said the boy told her how he threw a note in the fire to his father saying how much he loved him and " 'then the smoke went up to heaven and I knew that he read it.' "