

BEACH BUZZ

Fall 2003

Volume 3, Number 6

a publication of B.E.A.C.H.E.S. Foundation and its Chapters
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"Keeping Our Beaches Bare"

Some perspective on naturist youth camps

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Naturist youth camps have been around for a long time. In 1939, a chain of traditional camps in Vermont added skinny-dips, nude hikes, and nude gardening to their program. There were two boys' camps, a girls' camp, and a mixed camp for older teens. Those camps still operate today, though nudity is now restricted to the swimming area.

1954 saw the first youth camp at a nudist park: Camp Hy-Lee Crest in Pennsylvania. It operated through 1960. Similar camps have since sprung up at nudist parks in Connecticut, California, Florida, New York, Georgia, Texas, Virginia, and Arizona. And none of them ever closed because of scandal. Instead, most of them folded after several years when the adults ran out of energy. The California camps, for instance, were a huge operation attracting between 80 and 100 teens each year through much of the 1960s.

Florida's first nudist youth camp started in 1978 at City Retreat, now known as Gulf Coast Resort, north of Tampa. Jointly sponsored by the Eastern Sunbathing Association, it opened to accommodate the nation's first nude Boy Scout and Girl Scout troops. After the owner of City Retreat died, that camp moved to Sunsport Gardens near Loxahatchee.

When the Florida Association for Nude Recreation (FANR) organized in 1991, one of the first things we did was survey our clubs to find out how many kids we had. (Only adults show up on national records.) We found lots of 13-year-olds,

but almost no 14-year-olds. The clubs were doing a fine job of entertaining the little kids with Easter egg hunts and diving for pennies in the pool. But no local club had enough kids, the facilities, or the manpower to put on a program big enough to challenge the growing abilities of our teens. Across the state, they were dropping out from family nude recreation at age 14.

Older heads said, "Don't worry. They'll turn out fine. After all, every study has shown that juvenile delinquency

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and teen pregnancy are almost unknown in nudist families. They'll be back in ten years when they have married and have children of their own that they want to bring up in the same wholesome freedom."

But we did worry about those teenagers sitting at home unsupervised while their parents and younger brothers and sisters visited a nude beach or resort. We pride ourselves on being a family organization, and we wanted to keep our families together. That meant putting on a teen program, and only a statewide organization was big enough to do it.

Two years of planning and consulting with experienced camp leaders around the country produced a program with three goals:

1. Develop leadership & self-reliance

2. Sponsor personal growth through real accomplishment

3. Develop a philosophy of living naturally in closeness with nature (That last one includes drug-free living.) The camp opened in 1993, and has grown into the longest-running youth camp ever sponsored by a nudist organization. It now includes the Junior Camp (age 11-14), the Leadership Academy (15-18), and Nude U (18-23). The idea is spreading to other regions of the country.

Now, after all these years, a few politicians think they have discovered something new, and are making noises about the morality of it all. The morality of keeping our families together? The morality of teaching our children to live without unnatural substances in or on their bodies?

It must be said again and again: Naturists have families, and naturists have values.

I worked in Boy Scout camps for eleven years, but I never felt quite comfortable with the morality of that rifle range. Was that really what we wanted to be teaching our children? And I am very uneasy about certain religious camps that, in the name of a loving God, teach intolerance of other religions, or sometimes other races. I also have doubts about some sports or even music camps that teach cutthroat competition. What kind of camp is best for each child? These are decisions that only parents can make.

Governor Bush's office said it well: "The rights of parents to impart their values to their children and raise their children as they see fit are sacred." ☆