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**Camp tolerance: A Place that's safe
Ten Oaks, which opened this week in the Gatineau Hills, is a place for the 'Gayby
Boom' generation, and kids on the cusp**

By Chris Lackner

OTTAWA-- Two girls walk side by side toward a glistening lake -- their eagerness to reach the watery playground betrayed by rapid steps and wide eyes.

The scene has been repeated countless times at countless summer camps. For many Canadian children, cabins and campfires have become a seasonal rite of passage. But this camp moment is unique.

As the girls approach the water, one says: "My mother's gay." Without a moment's hesitation, the other smiles and says: "Yeah, so is mine."

Welcome to Camp Ten Oaks, a new retreat for the children of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered families, as well as gay teenagers. The overnight camp began operations this week on a 107-acre campground in the Gatineau Hills.

The exchange between the two girls was overheard by a counsellor, says camp co-founder Holly Wagg.

"We give kids a safe place to be who they are," Ms. Wagg says. "They're often afraid to tell people about their families, and that's such a big step for campers -- to say that, without worrying that the other person won't be their friend anymore."

While Nova Scotia's Rainbow Spirit Camp also caters to the children of gay parents, Ten Oaks is the first in Ontario. It's also the first Canadian camp to actively integrate gay youth with the children of gay parents.

Twenty-two campers signed on for Ten Oaks' debut: nine junior campers (eight- to 10-year-olds), 11 middle campers (aged 11 to 13) and two senior campers (aged 14 to 16).

Ms. Wagg, 27, is surrounded by mounds of Rice Krispie squares in the camp's faded yellow kitchen. With curly brown hair and stylish dark-rimmed glasses, she almost looks too metropolitan for the Gatineau backwoods.

Ms. Wagg and her partner, 25-year-old Julia Alarie, are co-founders of the camp.

Ten Oaks was inspired by Ms. Wagg's experiences at a gay-friendly camp in the United States. In the summers of 2003 and 2004, Ms. Wagg worked two-week stints at Mountain Meadow, a New Jersey summer camp for the children of gay families and gay youth. Launched 14 years ago, the camp is one of the oldest of its kind in North America.

When Ms. Wagg moved to Ottawa in 2004, she noticed a lack of programming for gay families. With an aim to fill the void, Ten Oaks began to take shape in her mind.

Ms. Wagg says the campers at Ten Oaks fall into three categories: 90 per cent are the children of gay parents, five per cent identify themselves as gay, and another five per cent fit into both categories.

Ms. Wagg says roughly 90 per cent of the children raised by gay parents grow up to be heterosexual.

“Many of Ten Oaks kids are from parents who used to be in a heterosexual relationship, but that marriage has now ended. We offer kids a place where they can feel comfortable about their family situations.”

The activities at Ten Oaks, with a few exceptions, are just like those at any children's camp. Campers are immersed in crafts, drama, music, water sports and outdoor games.

But Ten Oaks offers two activities that cater to its campers' unique family structures.

On the first day, kids participated in an activity called "Across the Grass." Standing in a line, they waited for their counsellors to introduce a personal characteristic. If the characteristic -- such as whether their favourite colour was blue -- suited them, they could cross a grassy area to form a new line.

"We'd start with questions like 'Please cross the grass if you brought a stuffed animal to camp' or 'Please cross the grass if you are left-handed.'

"Eventually those led to things like 'Please cross the grass if you identify as LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, queer) or 'Please cross the grass if you have two parents of the same sex.'"

Ms. Wagg says the activity helped campers feel comfortable with one another.

"It's a space that's safe for kids to see who is like them and who is different. In the end, kids are like, 'Oh my gosh, there are all these other kids with gay parents.'"

Stephanie, a 13-year-old from Grimsby, Ont., says she is the only child with a same-sex parent in her town. The Across the Grass activity made her realize she isn't alone.

"As the questions got harder, it became more serious, but everyone was supportive when you walked across the line or if you were the first one to take a step."

Kids also participated in Family Hour, in which they were offered the chance to discuss their family situations or personal experiences with other campers their age.

Katherine Arnup, a Carleton University professor who has written about gay families for 25 years, says the legalization of gay marriage will move more gay couples to have or adopt children.

She says Ten Oaks will likely be joined by other Canadian queer-friendly camps in the coming years.

Carolyn Thompson, the executive direction of New Jersey's Mountain Meadow camp, calls the growth in gay families the "Gayby Boom."

"More and more gay couples are having children through artificial insemination and it's now much easier for couples to adopt."

While the needs of gay families may have created the demand, Ten Oaks' focus remains on giving kids a traditional camp experience.

On one morning, a group of eight- to 13-year-olds is battling at the waterfront for the right to carry the Oak Olympic torch. With its decorative rainbow stripes, the torch is the only thing in the camp symbolically tied to the queer community.

A hula-hoop relay, Frisbee toss and game of tug-of-war precede the final Olympic event - an underwater search for multi-coloured rings.

The kids are cheered on by counsellor Chris C*. The 25-year-old has short, spiked blonde hair and is clad in red swimming trunks, a white tank top and a blue boa.

Chris, who came out in his first year at university, says he wishes a camp like Ten Oaks had existed while he was growing up. Chris wrestled for years with his sexuality.

"I had great camp experiences growing up, but you really noticed the heterosexual nature of camps.

"There is teasing that can go on but, more than anything, you feel like you're not fully included. I knew I was questioning my sexuality at camp, but it was assumed that everyone was heterosexual and that your parents were a mother and a father. There was no room for any alternatives."

Chris says that, at Camp Ten Oaks, what campers don't say is more important than what they do say.

“In my experience, at a lot of other camps you would at least have someone called a homo, a fag or a butch.”

While name-calling and teasing are almost non-existent, the nature of Ten Oaks poses other complications.

Ms. Wagg says queer-friendly camps face a special challenge with trans-identified children – kids who identify as members of the opposite sex.

While working at Mountain Meadow, Ms. Wagg met children as young as 10 who felt like they were trans-gendered. One female camper at Mountain Meadow, who identified as male, slept in a female cabin during her first year before moving to male quarters the following summer.

At Ten Oaks, the cabins are unabashedly rustic and sparse. They each contain four bunk beds and little else. But the setup lends itself to classic camp pranks. One night, a group of campers put plastic snakes in one of the counsellor’s sleeping bag.

Camp Ten Oaks rents its facilities from a Christian girls camp called Camp Kalalla. Ottawa's Canadian Girls In Training have operated Kalalla, a native word for "meeting place," since 1949. The camp operates for four weeks every summer and rents its property the rest of the year.

Ms. Wagg says the camp's owners have been extremely supportive of Ten Oaks.

"Our values and philosophies of camp are the same, we just serve different populations. We're all about giving kids that outdoor experience in a place away from home. Because we had that shared vision, they were fine with it."

Carol Ann Joiner, a spokeswoman for Camp Kalalla, says the organization’s management committee unanimously supported Ten Oaks’ proposal.

“There really wasn’t any hesitation because the camp was for children of lesbians and gays. The Ten Oaks camp is for children to explore nature, develop their strengths and build self-confidence. Their mission statement is similar to our own.”

The lack of opposition to Camp Ten Oaks stands in contrast to the obstacles New Jersey's Mountain Meadow has faced. Executive director Carolyn Thompson says the camp has kept its location private as a safety precaution. "We have had some struggles with conservative groups trying to figure out where the camp is so they can come out and protest," she said.

The epicenter of Ten Oaks is its dining hall, a large wooden cabin with fading red paint built in the 1940s. The children gather here before each meal for announcements and sing-alongs, many of them clad in blue T-shirts that say “I love Camp Ten Oaks.”

When lunch is served – garden salad and ravioli – hungry campers begin to devour everything in sight. Among them is 16-year-old Aqqalu and his 13-year-old brother Nuka.

They moved from Iqaluit, Nunavut so their mom could live with her partner.

Aqqalu has taken on the role of a junior counsellor, planning scavenger hunts and other activities for younger kids.

A former cadet, he once took part in a survival camp in the Yukon. He says he had to survive in the wilderness armed with only a pocket knife, a role and a sleeping bag, largely living on a diet of wild onions.

“At this camp, there is a lot less hiking,” he smiles shyly. “And the food is a bit better.”

Twelve-year-old Kayla says she didn’t hide the nature of Ten Oaks from her schoolmates and friends.

“I told everyone at school I’m going to gay camp,” she says proudly. “It doesn’t bother me if they tease me. I just ignore them and they give up.”

When she was in Grade 6, Kayla’s mother told her she was gay. Surrounded by kids with similar stories, she cites Ten Oaks as one of the best experiences of her life. “I think this camp makes people stronger and more comfortable, accepting whether they are gay or lesbian or their parents or anyone in their family is.”

A key feature of Ten Oaks is its economic accessibility. Ms. Wagg says two-thirds of their campers come from families below the poverty line. Camp fees exist on a “pay-what-you-can scale,” ranging from \$20 to \$600.

Operating on a budget of \$15,000, the camp has relied heavily on fundraising, private donations and a one-time \$5,000 grant from the City of Ottawa. Only 10 per cent of their budget comes from camp fees.

Ms. Wagg says many of the campers’ parents are single or two-woman families whose earning power is less than the average heterosexual couple or gay male couple.

Brenda Nelson, a 31-year-old mother from the Montreal area, says the low fees allowed her to send three of her children to Ten Oaks.

“This is a fresh thing for my kids. I went through a life change a few years ago and went through a divorce. They’ve never been around other kids who’ve had the same experience.”

Ms. Nelson says her kids are supportive of her engagement to her new partner and are helping to plan their wedding.

“They’re very open. I’ve had counseling for them, but they’ve adapted very well. I think camp will be good for them too.”

The camp’s administrative director and co-founder, Julia Alarie, seems to be needed in three places at once throughout the day, armed with a perpetually screeching walkie-talkie. She makes running a camp look exhausting.

“There are camps for people with disabilities, for kids who have cancer or are in remissions and for religious groups,” Ms. Alarie says in refuting their worries. “When you’re young, there is a lot of strength to be found in likeness. To know there are other people who understand what you’re going through is really important.”

She says the camp’s organizing committee met with many parents to ease their concerns.

“Parents just want a place where their kids can come to escape the questions or – in some cases – homophobia that they experience in their everyday life. Many of these kids grow up in the gay community but identify as straight. They’re on the cusp of both worlds and that’s an interesting space to negotiate.

“There are some kids asking questions about their own sexuality, but that’s just a regular part of being a teen and pre-teen.”

She says other camps and the public school system often neglect the needs of queer families and children. Many children are accused of being gay just because their parents are, she explains.

“When a six-year-old is asked to draw a picture of her family, teachers don’t realize she may be forced to decide whether to draw both of her mothers and out her family. It’s just assumed that kids are from some kind of hetero-family structure.”

Due to Ten Oaks’ sensitive nature, the 13-member staff is older than those at most summer camps (the youngest counsellor is 22). Many have strong backgrounds in youth work, including professional jobs as teachers and social workers.

Not all the kids at Camp Ten Oaks are from queer families or identify as gay themselves. Homeopathic doctor Allyson McQuinn - part of a heterosexual couple - registered her two kids for the camp. She also signed up to be the camp’s medic.

With greying hair, a pink shirt and a matronly smile, Ms. McQuinn sits on the porch of the health cabin in case her services are needed. Her kids, Jordan Glatt, 11, and Adie Glatt, seven, are off playing with their fellow campers.

"I try and ensure my kids have a healthy respect and awareness for families of various origins, backgrounds and nationalities. I try to expose them to as much as possible."

Ms. McQuinn says more kids could benefit from her own children's experience.

"Their godparents are also a same-sex couple. It's not a big deal for them – it's just another kind of family and another kind of life."

Jordan, a wiry, blond boy, pauses and takes on a pensive expression when asked about his Ten Oaks experience. Finally he declares that, while he has been bullied at school, he has learned that the children of gay parents often face much worse.

"One girl told me she had a best friend who dumped her. It's amazing how mean some people are," he says. "It's not people's background that matters – it's who people are."

Beyond being queer-friendly, the camp preached a wider message of tolerance. Before a dinner of corn, potatoes and barbecued chicken, campers are provoked into a lengthy discussion on things that make people different.

Among the suggestions: "The way we eat. Our voices. The way we dress. Our colour."

Campers are asked to adopt a disability throughout dinner. The deaf wrap scarves around their ears, the blind wear tinted glasses, and some children put one arm in a makeshift sling, eating their meals with one hand.

At dinner, some of the older children discuss what it's like to have gay parents.

"It feels really encouraging that you're not the only one who feels alone sometimes – the only one who feels like they can't tell anybody," says 12-year-old Emily.

"I feel like I can trust people here. You know nobody's going to make fun of you because they've all had similar experiences."

The freckled, red-haired girl says her mother and stepmother have been engaged for four years. "They can't figure out when they want to get married," she says in exasperation.

"And I keep saying 'Get married, get married, get married.'"

As the dishes pile up, the kids move on from dinner to the Rice Krispie squares. Soon they're led off by counsellors for their evening activity, a variation on hide-and-go-seek called "Counsellor Hunt."

Left with dish duty, Ms. Wagg looks tired but happy that another day has gone smoothly. While she hopes camp's enrolment increases next year, she also dreams of a day when it can be shut down.

"I'd love to see a day when a camp like ours isn't needed because our kids felt comfortable and accepted everywhere.

"We've come a long way as a society, but we're not there yet."

*some names have been changed post-publication.