

The Bill Canfield Fly Fishing Camp from a Parent's and a Mentor's Perspective.

By Steve Taggart, 20 year guide on the Upper Delaware

It was a beautiful, sunny, late June morning in the Catskills. We were driving up Rt 97, headed towards French Woods near Hancock. My sister and family are following close behind. We are all very excited. This is my daughter's and my sister's two boys first camp away from home. Aly and Michael are 14 and Ethan is 12. This camp runs from Sunday through Sunday. Even though we all spend a lot of time in the area, it is hard to ignore the beauty of the view as we near French woods. The



view from Rt 97 extends far over the Delaware River valley, many miles into Pennsylvania. The scene from camp is even nicer. The French Woods Camp is divided into two separate camps. One side is the performing arts camp, where some of the most gifted students from around the world attend. Your children might know Adam Levine from Maroon 5, or Zooey Deschanel from the movie Elf who both attended this camp.

The other side is the newer sports and performing arts camp where the fly fishing camp is held. After some initial confusion, we find the road into camp past an old working farm. As we pull up to the campus we are surprised, and we all have smiles on our faces.

As we pull into our parking spots, we are greeted by very upbeat dancing and singing camp counselors. They have a stereo system set up outside and are blasting friendly dance music. The counselors are from all over the world. I have met some from New Zealand, Spain, France, South America, from different US states, and many other countries. Many counselors were once camp attendees. After introductions, the children's bags are labeled and loaded onto a UTV, and we are given a tour of the facilities.

We first head to the kids bunk rooms. There are a bunch of individual buildings, boys and girls separate of course, and each are assigned two bunk masters (counselors). Next up was the Mess Hall, which would also serve as the fly tying classroom later in the week. While there, a typical afternoon thunderstorm moved in, and I was watching the show from the many large windows. A young boy came over to join me. He was from Russia and was going to be there all summer. The last stop on our tour was the main



building. The camp nurse needed to meet each child, check each for head lice, and go over any allergies or medications they may need to take. Our tour guide informed the kids that the Fly Camp was their “Major” activity, and they had to pick two “Minor” activities. There are too many to list, but here a few: circus (which had really cool dudes from South America



teaching trapeze, unicycle, trampoline, and other rad stuff) dance, art classes, video game design, shooting film on a blue screen, music (my daughter Aly learned a beautiful piano piece, mountain biking, skate boarding, and a bunch of other sports and cool activities. In the

evenings they had campfires, movie showings, and other group entertainment. When the tour ended the kids gave us a hug, and we could tell they were excited to start their adventure.

As parents, we were blown away by the professionalism of the camp, staff, amenities, location, and the quality of the activities offered. We left with peace of mind that our children were in good hands. I was also in a unique position. I was going to be one of the fly fishing mentors for the camp. This was my first one. I have been at every camp since and will never miss another one. I am now also on the camp committee and want to spread the word of this awesome opportunity for the children in your life.

The itinerary for the fly camp varies a little from session to session. We are constantly working as a team to make the

program better and to keep it fresh for the kids that return to the camp. That team is mostly made up of FUDR, Friends of the Upper Delaware, members. Sherri Resti is the person to contact when you sign up, and the liaison between the fly camp and French Woods. Dan Plummer, the former chairman of FUDR for twelve years, is ever-present at the camp and committee meetings. FUDR Board Members Joe Demalderis, Pete Grimblas, and Lee Hatrman along with long time Upper Delaware River Guide Ben Rinker are integral to the success and continued growth of the Bill Canfield Fly Fishing Camp. There is also a long list of members that help behind the scene and at the camp as mentors. There have been many repeat campers including two brothers who live near French Woods, a few local children, a boy from Italy, and two girls who met at camp and became close friends. I will give you a general idea of what kids will experience in the fly fishing portion of the camp.

On Monday morning after breakfast, each session starts right after breakfast, the campers meet in the main lobby to meet their mentors for a brief orientation. Joe “D” Demalderis, who founded the camp (that is a whole another article by itself), starts off the proceedings. Each kid receives a fly rod, reel, and fly line that they get to take home after camp. The first day is spent learning about the gear and learning how to cast a fly rod. This is done on the lawn and ponds that are on the grounds. The



session ends before lunch, and they get to partake in their “Minor” activities in the afternoon.

Tuesday is usually a field day on a stream or river. I say

usually because Fly Tying day which is normally Wednesday, can be moved



around if we have dangerous weather or heavy rain. This day the kids get to learn about the anatomy of a trout stream. They look for bugs, crustaceans, bait fish, and cool critters that live around water such as painted turtles. Then they get to cast their rods while standing in moving water and learn a bit about presentation. The ratio of mentors to students is 1:1 or 2:1 at worst. A French Woods lifeguard is also on hand, safety is a top priority. This is often a full day with a stream side lunch. They may have little time before dinner for their Minor.

As I said, Wednesday is fly tying day. They will learn three or four patterns as a group such as a caddis dry, pheasant tail



nymph, a woolly bugger, and a May Fly dry. Again, the ratio of mentor to student is high, so if someone is more advanced a mentor will show them something more involved. The cool thing about this day, is they get to put these flies to the test the

next day on a world class Trout Stream.

The big day! Thursday is by far the highlight of the fly camp. They are bussed to a private club on the Upper Beaverkill River called, Beaverkill Trout Club, which dates back to 1875. It



is one of the oldest fishing clubs in the country. There are many Fly Fishing Guides that help with the camp and this day gets the most mentors. The miles of private water are broken into beats. One of the club members goes over the

map of the pools and gives the kids a brief history of the club and the river. The kids get to fish a few hours in the morning followed by an awesome lunch cooked by the club staff. After lunch the beats are switched up, and those unlucky in the morning are put



into the best runs. At the end of the day there are many tales of fish caught, the ones missed, and of course...the big one that got away. The joy of the day's experiences on their faces, even the few who don't catch fish, is heartwarming and the mentors feel the specialness of this day as well.

Friday and Saturday are also field trips. Last year we went to the Catskill Fly Fishing Center & Museum. The kids learned



about the history of fly fishing in the area, the birthplace of fly fishing in the United States. Then they fished a pond on site and got to cast into the famous Willowemoc Creek. The year my daughter and nephews attended we went to a

restaurant with a large private pond full of huge Rainbow Trout.

Saturday has been spent with a full day at Indian Springs Camp on the Main Stem of the Delaware River. It's a chill day spent fishing, feasting, and solidifying the friendships made throughout the week. There is a bittersweet mood in the air.

The happiness and joy it has brought the kids and mentors alike, the sadness that the adventure is almost over, and the friendships bonded will soon go their separate ways.

Hopefully the kids at camp learn that the friendships forged through the love of the outdoors is among the strongest bonds of all and often last a lifetime.



Sunday is time for the kids to enjoy their last morning at camp. Soon the parents will start to arrive and families are united. When we picked up our clan, they were all smiles. Michael and Ethan strengthened their brotherly bond and Aly made a friend that she still stays in contact with. It was an experience they will never forget!