

Waban: Home of the 'Best Week Ever' Summer camp has been providing fun and growth since the Sixties

By Selena Brock Sanford News Guest Writer

Thursday, October 3, 2013

From the mid-Sixties to 2013, Waban has been a source of joy and personal growth for the people of York County, Southern Maine and the neighboring communities throughout the rest of Maine and other parts of New England.

Through the years, the organization has grown and evolved to better serve the needs of individuals with developmental and other disabilities. Naturally, it was a perfect fit when the Muscular Dystrophy Association planned its annual summer camp week at Waban's Summer Camp, now called the TREE Center.

MDA promotes its summer camp as "the best week of the year," a time and place where everything is accessible, where fellow campers are just like them, and where no boundaries exist. Every year, MDA throws into full throttle a week designed to break down barriers and provide an unforgettable experience for kids with muscular dystrophy.

This year, the camp was held at Waban's TREE Center on the shores of Bauneg Beg Lake in Sanford — a perfect location for a fun-filled week of lakeside activities and memories, with a mission and philosophy that dovetail perfectly with MDA's goal to provide a memory to hold on to, a story to tell, and a song to sing.



In 2013, Camp Waban's waterfront is still a bustling place with swimming and boating



Waban Executive Director Neal Meltzer is about to make a splash in the dunk tank during the recent 2013 Staff Appreciation Day at Camp Waban.

Waban's Summer Camp, fondly known as Camp Waban, has been in existence since 1966. Four lifetime friends started with a vision for a special place where people with developmental disabilities and other special needs could go and enjoy the summer. This restful place would be founded on the principle of providing loving help, motivation and patience so vital to the human needs of each person. Spring Hill in Berwick provided the first location for this extraordinary dream, and doctors, nurses and teachers volunteered to staff the camp. In 1967, the camp moved to its current location on Bauneg Beg Lake with the purchase of a former girls' camp by the newly formed Waban Projects, Inc., under the direction of Wayne A. Wormwood, a retired special education teacher.

Camp attendance grew from 24 the first year to 60 the second year at the new location. Over the years, the camp expanded and became a fixture in the summer plans of the local Sanford community. Many of us who grew up in Sanford have a memory of that summer we volunteered at Camp Waban

between school years. It was a great place to be introduced to the joy of helping children and adults challenged with developmental and other disabilities. We remember a bustling waterfront with swimming campers, pontoon boat rides, kayak paddling around Lollipop Island, gathering in the Commons for lunch or crafts, or singing around the campfire. Day campers left at the end of the day and resident campers settled into cabins for the night. For about eight weeks, camp was a very lively place.

"I was thirteen years old when I started working in the kitchen doing dishes at Waban's Summer Camp," said Doug Gardner, now the director of the Health & Human Services Department for the City of Portland. "That was 1981."

In the ten summers following that year, Gardner would return to Camp Waban, an easy walk from where he grew up on Country Club Road 3 in Sanford. Eventually, he became a camp counselor for the residential campers.

"It was the best job I ever had," stated Gardner. "I developed a passion for working with this vulnerable group of folks and had the opportunity to learn a lot about adults and children and the challenges they faced."



The waterfront was the spot for morning exercise at Camp Waban in the 1960s.

Gardner's experience at Camp Waban influenced his choices in education, eventually steering him to a career of service to this vulnerable population. As a memento of his years at Waban, he saved every t-shirt from every year he worked at camp.

Charlene Ford Ralston, the retired assistant executive director of Waban Projects and the summer camp director for more than 25 years, noted how campers looked forward to their summer visit all year.



Fun, carefree days of yesteryear - - swimmers enjoy Bauneg Beg Lake at Camp Waban in the 1960s.

"Children and adults with developmental disabilities had fewer opportunities in those early years of camp," she said. "They were not as accepted by the general public and lived a very segregated life. Camp offered a chance to experience some of the activities and surroundings that many people take for granted."

Waban continued to modernize the facilities and expand the activities at Summer Camp, but Ralston remembers the one constant — the smiles on the faces of the campers.

"Music and swimming were the favorite activities. They had music of every sort, singing, playing instruments and even blasting over the loudspeakers. Even the most profoundly disabled campers responded to music," she said.

In the months between the end of August and the following summer, camp remained pretty quiet, with the exception of a few groups utilizing the waterfront area for company picnics. Campers returned to their homes and lives, looking forward to the moment they could return to Camp Waban. Volunteers and staff went back to school or work or home, tired from their efforts but satisfied with the fulfilling accomplishment of having supported such a worthy cause.

Away from camp, year-round staff took on the commitment of providing new programs and services for children and adults by expanding Waban's offerings to improve the lives of the individuals and families whose challenges continued after leaving camp.

Now, 47 summers later, Waban Projects has blossomed and grown to include year-round programs for children and adults, including the Fraser-Ford Child Development Center, Life Works (a CARF-accredited day habilitation center), 23 residences for adults, case management for children and adults and social enterprises, such as SecureRMS, a confidential information destruction company that provides businesses with secure shredding services while also creating jobs for people with disabilities. Camp Waban itself has grown to include year-round activities and a whole new and improved lakeside facility called the TREE Center, which stands for Teambuilding Recreation and Environmental Education.

The TREE Center offers summer camp, still called Camp Waban, and hosts individuals, families, group homes, schools and organizations serving people with disabilities. Teambuilding programs are available for businesses and schools, and year-round recreational activities and environmental studies utilize the expanding trail system and challenge courses. Also part of the TREE Center is the Wormwood Center, a banquet and conference facility, which makes the lakefront property an ideal venue for weddings and events.

On Aug. 29, the staff and directors of MDA gathered at the Ocean Gateway for their first-ever "Show of Strength Telethon Premier Party" to celebrate the individuals, companies and organizations that support MDA throughout the year. Ann Rossignol, the director of the TREE program, was presented with a recognition plaque with the message, "Our heartfelt thanks for making a muscle and a difference," noting that campers couldn't wait to come back to Camp Waban, and it was truly the best week of the year.

All of the activities at Waban would not be possible without generous support from the community as well as the dedicated and committed staff whose day-to-day activities are instrumental to the thousands of individuals who have benefitted from the services that the organization provides.

On Saturday, Sept. 14, the summer camp was the site of Waban's Staff Appreciation Day, where employees from all programs of Waban, accompanied by their families, were recognized for their hard work and efforts and were able to enjoy a barbecue, music, pontoon boat rides and kayaking. The dunk tank was a favorite, as folks were able to create a splash by dunking their bosses. Despite a soaking, Executive Director Neal Meltzer was happy to present awards for years of service to dedicated employees and thanked them for being "the folks that make it happen," proving once again that for the "the best week (or day) of the year," Waban is the place to be.