

PASSING IT ON

As a child, I attended several different kinds of summer camps. Some were day camps, others were sleep away. In every case, there was a distinct sense of camaraderie that developed at a camp. There is something about being together every day, not only for the trials and tribulations of the camp's lessons, but also for meals, recreation and downtime that allow a group to bond in a unique way.

Most camps are for children, so the privilege of this experience is typically limited to young campers and their camp staff.

In the summer of 2009, I had an opportunity to attend a summer camp with my own children. I was not on staff, and I was not a parent chaperone. I was a camper. Once again, I felt that special "summer camp bond".

THE CAMP

CCE MAD (for Trad) Week is a day camp that originally began as a week of intensive lessons for Irish fiddle students. The camp has recently expanded to include opportunities for students focusing on Irish flute, Irish guitar, or Sean Nos Dancing and Set Dancing. It is open to students of any age, children or adults, with a certain level of musical proficiency in their chosen instrumental instruction track.

I first registered my 11-year-old daughter, Katie, to attend this 2009 camp as a fiddle student. Later that spring, in an effort to promote the "old style" traditional Sean Nos Dancing and Irish Set Dancing among the younger generations, the camp decided to offer free tuition to students under the age of 18 who wished to choose the camp's dancing track.

This afforded me a unique opportunity. By registering Katie, I had already committed to a long daily commute with my younger daughter in tow, 7-year-old Ellie. Now I was being given the chance to have both of my girls in the same camp for the price of one.

It also allowed me the opportunity to consider registering myself. Being the Irish music and dance enthusiast that I am, I decided to enroll. Yet still, I remained slightly skeptical. I predicted that the "true campers" would be the children, and that the adult participants would be limited to a handful of musicians or dancers who only partially joined the activities.

But then, I had not yet factored in that unique "summer camp bond"...

THE COMMUNITY

On the first day of camp, Director Mitch Fanning introduced the staff, set the ground rules, and explained the intentions of the camp. Of utmost importance was that each student, regardless of age, be willing to temporarily step out of his or her comfort zone, thereby fostering an optimal "learning zone". Point taken, but again, I still thought that this was more for the children, and was not yet sure that I would be willing to stretch myself in a group full of strangers. So, smile firmly in place, I meandered through Monday surrounded by friendly people, most of who seemed just as guarded as I was.

What developed over the next four days is something very precious.

Each morning, campers and staff would gather in a large room for "warm up" and announcements. Then groups would divide for the various courses of study. Lunch was a two-hour block during which electives were offered, such as tin whistle lessons, bodhran lessons, singing, arts & crafts, or some free time. Afternoon sessions resumed with the course focus groups, and then all campers gathered once again in the great room.

If Monday could be considered the day of introductions, Tuesday was the day of awkward giggles, as campers each began to exit their comfort zones and explore the possibilities. When perhaps a camper recognized that they might have initially stepped a bit too far outside their comfort zone, he or she was gently guided by the caring staff to a more appropriate group. This was truly was a "safe" environment, ideal for learning.

During the large group gathering time in the afternoon, a faculty concert was held. This was an opportunity for each member of the camp staff to share a gift of their artistry with the camp at large. At Monday's concert, the oohs and aahs of appreciation were predominant among the campers. At Tuesday's concert, there were murmurs of recognition for specific techniques, and it seemed that several connections were being made between the day's lessons and this demonstration of mastery.

On Wednesday afternoon, instead of a faculty concert, campers were encouraged to share some of their talents. By offering this opportunity in the middle of the week, it became less of a “recital” of what students were learning in their courses, and more of an “opening” for that call to s-t-r-e-t-c-h. In my opinion, this was the pivotal moment of community bonding for this camp.

By Thursday, faces were familiar, and friendships had formed. There was an overwhelming sense of support among the campers and the staff. No longer was it only the staff who continued to raise the bar by challenging their campers’ skills. Campers themselves were each pushing the envelope, both as individuals and in peer groups.

Friday was one of the most extraordinary days that I have ever experienced. In every pocket of free time, impromptu sessions blossomed. And each was initiated by the campers, not the staff. There was not a corner of the campus untouched by these spontaneous explosions of camper collaborations. Fiddles and flutes, guitars and bodhrans, bagpipes and dance shoes. The artistry flowing from this community was staggering, and the creative energy was wonderfully infectious.

THE TRADITION

The CCE Camp Week was an opportunity to experience traditional Irish music at its best. Under the guidance of enthusiastic masters, campers of all ages were challenged and nurtured. What grew from this effort was a mutual respect that broke through all barriers. No matter their background, no matter their age, each individual was offered the opportunity to step into this tradition, and to help it grow.

Traditional Irish music is not static, and cannot be documented solely in written form. It is dynamic. It is best experienced in a group setting, and it thrives among the youth and the newcomers who respect its foundations. This creates a community that is *enhanced* by cultural traditions, not restricted by them.

At the afternoon faculty concerts during camp week, each staff member would introduce his or her piece before performing it. The introduction typically included the name of the musician who taught them the tune, where they learned it, and how it connected to a style from one of the counties in Ireland. This “aural heritage” formed the fabric of the community, woven from threads of individuals from many different cultural backgrounds, bound by a common respect for and appreciation of traditional Irish music.

For my daughters and me, the CCE Camp Week was a chance to share a “summer camp bond”, and is a new family tradition that we hope to continue in future summers. I did not feel that I was just the “parent”, or the awkward adult camper. It was truly an honor and a privilege to participate in this camp.

Traditional Irish music has a unique way of blurring the generational lines.

Learn it. Live it. Love it. And pass it on....

Meg Ortel lives in Glenwood, Maryland, with her husband and their two girls. In addition to her interests in Irish music, and her involvement with the various and sundry activities of her daughters, Meg is also the Communications Manager for the Teelin School of Irish Dance (www.teelin.com).

More information about CCE Camp Week may be found at www.ccepotomac.org. This site also lists other opportunities to experience traditional Irish music at local sessions and ceilis.