

Camp HASC

A World

Focusing on their campers' strengths instead of their limitations makes everything possible at Camp HASC.

by Rochel Weinstein

When Mountandale, in upstate New York, was my home for more than a decade, the summer tourist explosion usually meant waiting a bit longer in lines and searching harder for parking spaces. I remember the general feeling of appreciation towards the entrepreneurs who establish restaurants and other conveniences that don't normally exist in the area during the rest of the year.

But beyond the annual hustle and bustle, however, there is an entirely different dimension of purpose in the area in the form of summer camps. These oases of fun and friendship offer children (and adults) the opportunity to spend July and August involved in activities that build character skills for life. Each camp is like a separate diamond on a necklace, with the brilliant sparkle of *achdus* and *ahavas Yisrael*. Of these, Camp HASC is perhaps its most precious gem.

Situated in Parksville, New York, it is the summer residence for hundreds of children and adults from across the globe with intellectual and physical disabilities. In this extraordinary place, I discovered how an immensely talented group of individuals make it possible for these precious souls to enjoy a seven-week sleepaway camp experience.

At the main entrance of camp, I meet two of the leaders of Camp HASC, Rabbi Shlomo Stern and Mr. Shmiel Kahn.

Lunch is underway, so our first stop is the dining room. To get there, we walk along wide, clean sidewalks and one of the camp's four adaptive playgrounds that accommodate the campers' special needs. The grounds are naturally beautiful, and though most of the camp is busy with their meal, the atmosphere of selflessness and *chesed* is already evident as we pass the various buildings that serve the camp. They are testimonies to the generosity that permeates the camp; each one proudly displaying a plaque with the name of the magnanimous donor that helped make it happen.

The stillness in the camp diminishes as we approach the thunder of the bustling dining room. It is "Color War," and the players at battle are decked out in brown and blue. All around the dining room are posters made by the teams, each one more humorous and creative than the next. The ruthless challenge usually associated with Color War is nowhere to be found. It is apparent that, similar to other activities in the camp, the main focus is which team will have provided its members with the most fun and entertainment, rather than who wins in the end.

One counselor approaches us with a warm greeting and points out that some staff members ran to Wal-Mart the night before because their campers did not come dressed in brown or green clothing. In HASC, such devotion is customary. Members of the hand-picked staff, many of them young adults who have finished a year of college or seminary or yeshivah in Israel, are carefully screened to ensure that they meet the specific requirements that HASC demands — the first being a level of caring and concern that permeates their constant acts of *chesed* and devotion.

In the dining room, waitresses scurry in and out of the kitchen, while counselors double-check to make sure that their specific camper receives the appropriate meal, as therapists and teachers move from table to table helping campers and counselors who need a little extra assistance. The



HASC: World of Chesed

walls of the dining room shake with excitement as the two Color War teams chant cheers back and forth in the frenzy of friendly competition. From the dining room, it's on to the kitchen to meet the extraordinary team of people who help make this all happen.

Ordinarily, camp food may not have the best reputation. (Okay, *does* not!) In Camp HASC, however, the menu is chock full of delicious and carefully prepared food. I am surprised to learn that preparation for today's meal began sometime last December.

Devorah Kahn, the director of food services, explains the process: "At the end of the summer, we see what we used and how much we need for the following year. A list is made to determine what should be ordered and when. We plan the menu well before the next summer season begins."

Aliza Eisenstein, the dietician at HASC, simplifies the monumental challenge of providing food to hundreds of children, many of whom have different nutritional needs. "Before camp begins, we receive forms from parents explaining to us the exact details of their child's diet: whether it's a regular diet, high-fiber, low cholesterol, diabetic, etc. I take the menu for that day and adapt it for those categories so that these campers have something as similar as possible to what everybody else is eating. For example, if the meal is



Therapeutic amusement at Camp HASC

macaroni and cheese, then I'll supplement a camper's meal with whole wheat pasta or nondairy cheese or low-fat cottage cheese. In essence, the meal looks the same even though it's based on the nutritional needs of a specific camper."

But it is not just the nutritional needs of the campers that are addressed by the kitchen. Rather, the kitchen is just one piece of a well-oiled machine that works together to ensure that each camper has the summer of his/her life. "Parents can send their children away and not have to worry at all about their meals," explains Aliza. "Some parents will mention that

their child will only eat a certain food a certain way and that he won't eat anything else. It's not necessarily that a child has specific nutritional needs; it's just that they might be picky. In this situation, the child could, G-d forbid, start losing weight. Therefore we do our best to accommodate the child. The needs of these children are very involved, but they are all met here.

I later learn that a similar process is happening in the infirmary. A team of thirteen nurses and a full-time doctor are constantly busy arranging medication and meeting the medical needs of the

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campers. It is a monumental task to stay on top of it all, so the medical team relies on databases and binders to give them the information they need. Once more, the process is successful because this devoted team of professionals works together so beautifully.

Our next stop is the newer of HASC's two indoor pools. The shallow end of the pool includes a lakefront-like entrance with no steps, otherwise known as "zero entry," allowing counselors to escort their campers in specialized wheelchairs designed for this purpose. The room is filled with specialized toys and equipment for the campers to use, and a bevy of lifeguards surround the perimeter of the water. The floor of the pool slopes to five feet and then its depth decreases at the other end. The specially designed floor of the pool is rough in the shallower ends to allow traction for the adaptive swimming wheelchairs and other equipment. I am amazed at the intricate attention to detail that went into ensuring that every camper can have a safe aquatic experience. From the waterproof adaptive wheelchairs to specialized lifejackets, every need is met to ensure that every camper, regardless of his ability, can enjoy a swim.

As we continue walking, I am struck by how much of the camp's infrastructure is adapted to meet the specialized needs of the campers. The swings in the playground have seats adapted to every camper's need, including some with plat-

forms that allow children sitting in their wheelchairs to experience the sensation of swinging without ever leaving their seats. Every building has ramps and sidebars. The doors on many buildings swing open with a push of a button, and some do not even require a button to be pushed — they simply swing ajar as a person nears the doorway.

Right next to the pool is a pavilion with approximately twenty adaptive bikes. These, too, are intricately designed for the special rider and cost well over a thousand dollars each. Near the pavilion, I meet a counselor talking with his smiling camper as he escorts him on one of the bikes around a track.

Next we pass the complex of buildings referred to in camp as the Academics Program. Within this complex are nineteen classrooms and a state-of-the-art gym.

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Each class is led by a licensed special education teacher. I am told that most of the teachers return to camp year after year, as they too have been caught up in the loving and giving spirit that is so much a part of HASC. The air-conditioned classrooms are each decorated with student work on the various themes that are being carried out within the classrooms. There are different types of equipment in each class, depending on the needs of the students. Each teacher structures his or her class, working on group and individual goals with the campers, sharing their knowledge and expertise with the counselors, and working as a team to bring out the very best in each camper. I am told by Reeba Oestrich, the principal, that the academics program recently underwent an inspection from the State Education Department, and passed with flying colors.

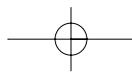
Our tour continues with a stroll down Rechov Yanky Eisen, named after a beloved camper that passed away only a few years before. It is evident that his memory is fresh in the minds of the entire HASC family as they relate stories of his uniqueness and his amazing magnetic smile. As we pass campers along the way, both Rabbi Stern and Mr. Kahn point out the unique strengths of each one. I am surprised that they can know each camper so intimately. As Rabbi Stern says, "Every camper is a star."

Avi Sacks, HASC's program director, greets us as he leads me to a waiting golf cart. He climbs into the driver's seat as Avi Pollak and Shaena Cantor, the boys' and girls' head counselors, join us. I am privileged to have this trio of exceptional talent give me the grand golf cart tour of the rest of the camp.

We pass the canteen and computer room, where staff and campers enjoy snacks, play games, and stay in touch with family and friends. One camper, Uri Butler, sits busily printing out e-mails that parents have sent to their children through the Camp HASC website. As part of Camp HASC's vocational program, Koach, Uri makes sure the e-mails get delivered to the appropriate campers, while his peers in the Koach program perform such tasks as loading soda machines, delivering mail, helping set up



The petting zoo at Camp HASC's all inclusive sensory program





Ahavas Yisrael at its best

for activities, and running errands throughout camp. We next come to the music room, which is filled with drums and other musical equipment that the campers can use while joining Yaakov, the camp music director, in a singalong or mini-concert. Next to the music room is the air-conditioned cooking room. In here, campers can make such delicacies as pizza, rice crispy treats, and even taco salad and challah along with Talya, the camp's cooking maven.

We continue to the art room, a popular activity room for the campers, and then head for the therapy building, which accommodates physical, speech, and occupational therapies.

The spacious room is filled with various adaptive learning equipment which helps encourage many campers to take their first steps or say their first words. The camp provides everything from walkers to standing chairs, bathing chairs, and feeding chairs to assist every camper in reaching her or her full potential.

Avi Sacks remarks that many children excel in their abilities at Camp HASC to an even greater degree than when at home, since counselors work with them all day. "Each camper gets a lot of attention each day. Even during meals, therapists can be seen walking around the dining room, encouraging children in their skills."

Next to the therapy room is a miniature golf course, built as a recreational activity a few years ago by HASC's nature counselor and a group of campers. The project took an entire summer to build, and not only did the campers and counselors have a great time constructing the course, but miniature golf has become a favorite activity in the years since.

As we admire their handiwork, we are approached by two counselors from the previous year who have come to Camp HASC for a visit. It is beautiful to see that the dedication and devotion to the camp does not wane once the counselors have left. That is why Camp HASC holds its annual Alumni Day, allowing former staff to revisit camp, touch base with their former campers, and see how the camp itself has grown.

EACH TEACHER STRUCTURES HIS OR HER CLASS, WORKING ON GROUP AND INDIVIDUAL GOALS WITH THE CAMPERS, SHARING EXPERTISE WITH THE COUNSELORS, AND WORKING AS A TEAM TO BRING OUT THE BEST IN EACH CAMPER

Alumni are not the only ones who make Camp HASC a stopover on their summer Catskills travels. Famous people from around the world make sure to stop by when they are in town. Camp HASC has enjoyed visits from various *rabbanim* such as Rav Mattisyahu Salomon, the Novominsker Rebbe, the Boyaner Rebbe from Yerushalyim, Rabbi Pesach Krohn, and Rabbi Yissachar Frand. Its twice-weekly concert series has featured Chaim Dovid, Yaakov Shwekey, Lipa Shmeltzer, Dovid Gabay, Uncle Moishe, Avraham Fried, and even a live Nachum Segal show. The campers and counselors love every minute of the concerts.

Indeed, as I speak more with Avi and Shaena, I am amazed at just how full each day at Camp HASC is for the campers and staff. There are basketball courts, a full-sized baseball field,

and a volleyball court, in addition to the bike track and two pools. There is a nature room with rabbits, guinea pigs, snakes, fish, and birds for the campers to observe, feel, and feed. There is an adaptive toy library filled with activities for ever level of ability and preference. In addition to today's Color War, the campers this summer have enjoyed a visiting a petting zoo, a carnival day, and helicopter rides. There were Olympic games on field day, musical activities at "Sing Down," and a cool parrot show. There was a visit from a balloon artist, an ice cream truck, and the Chai Riders Jewish Motorcycle Club. There are bonfires and game shows, trips to the bowling alley and pizza parlor, ice cream parties and barbecues. The list of activities and adventures is endless, and the staff is tireless in their drive to make sure that each camper is able to take part in every activity at his or her own level.

When I ask Avi about the range of disabilities at Camp HASC, his answer gives me a glimpse into the heartbeat of this incredible place.

"There are no disabilities at Camp HASC," he explains. "We focus on what they can do and the strengths that they have, not on what they can't do. All year long, people only notice what they can't do. But here in Camp HASC, we notice what the child is capable of. Based on what a child *can* do determines where he or she will be placed.

"Nothing is impossible if you focus on what these children can do instead of what the world has trained everyone to focus on, namely, what they can't do. Someone in a wheelchair can fly a kite: Someone else might have to lift the kite in the air first and then tie it in his hand and run. But he can still fly a kite. It's all a matter of perspective." ■



"The staff and campers of Camp HASC wish our family of friends a shanah tovah"