

## ***Making Memories for a Lifetime***

by Elizabeth Sadlon, member Neighborhood UU Church Pasadena

***Hosting over 25 family camp experiences a year, Camp de Benneville Pines has become a favorite place for families to come to enjoy quality time with family and friends. Read on for a glimpse of one family's perspective on the importance and value of family camp.***

My earliest memories of my younger daughter, Kenzie, at Camp de Benneville involve a Baby Bjorn carrier and a chair that clipped to the dinner table. As she shared her faith statement at Rites of Passage today, I reflected gratefully on all the ways the beloved camp in the woods has contributed to the amazing 14-year old she is today.

We have attended nearly 30 family camp weekends at de Benneville, summer and winter each year. When our daughters were little, we were drawn to the physical beauty of the mountains and won over by the simplicity of the cozy cabins, the treat of having someone prepare three delicious meals for us each day, and the circle of parents who would take turns monitoring the fun. Camp days were filled with exploring, archery, and swimming in the summer; sledding and snow shoes in the winter. For several years we'd lead a hike for the young kids, through the woods, to a river not more than a quarter of a mile away. Whether organized around a scavenger hunt, a nature tour, or poetry, the trek would meander through space and time, arriving at the steep banks of the stream. Would there be water this year? Salamanders? Ice to crackle? Always rocks to scramble.

As the kids got older, de Benneville was the perfect setting for developing independence. Their territory began as the circle inscribed by the driveway, eventually expanding to include the neighboring hillsides. Hours would pass as they engineered intricate forts, or hurtled down slick sled trails. We all gather again at the sound of the meal bell, the kids filling a table, then their tummies, and tumbling back out for more adventures. By the time high school rolled around, we'd supervise a "teen room" for our older daughter Allie and her friends adjacent to our room. And this summer, at 19, they gathered from distant colleges, drove themselves to camp, had their own space, and kept the tradition alive!

Happy kids at camp make for happy parents. We're fortunate to have varied programming during family camps. From early morning yoga or hikes; to writing, spa treatments, and crafting; to beer tasting, bee watching, and social hour, the camp schedule has it all. Or, I often choose to do nothing at all. My besties know to meet at the gazebo to share stories, support, and sometimes drop into quiet reading together. My husband brings a cribbage board to the only place in our busy lives where he can settle in for a couple of hours of conversation and cards. Over meals and in between, we look forward to connecting with long-time and new church friends, including those we only see when we're up the hill.

Nighttime at de Benneville continues the opportunity to disconnect from the usual media feeds. Our Bingo games are always high energy and good-natured; I'm amazed how excited we all get to "win" the castaway trinkets and doo dads fellow campers bring along. Whether the schedule includes a talent showcase, Moth-style stories, TED-type talks, star gazing, movie watching, singalong, or dancing... we know we'll meet new friends, share deep laughs, and be happy together.

After Saturday breakfast, we all roll over to the volleyball court and are greeted by a warm, grizzly photographer on the decked-out roof of his SUV. Instead of "cheese," the kids shout, "fuzzy pickles," and before we leave on Sunday we each have a glossy picture to commemorate this camp gathering. Back home, we lovingly slide each picture into our de Benneville binder. Flipping through, we see the kids' grinning faces, popping out of winter gear, or entwined in campers' limbs, changing over the years. This is a treasure book of memories, experiences, of growing up and loving well.

This *is* a church camp, after all, and *Sunday mornings at de Benneville fill our souls*. Depending on season, worship is either in the awe-inspiring grove of towering pines, or snuggled cozily in the Coffee House. We gather together; share songs, stories, poems; listen to the wind; and so readily connect to the source of wonder that surrounds us.

We all have families that lead the way... the friends whose kids are 5 or 10 years older than ours, who smile to hear our stories, remind us that we have what is needed, and give a preview of what comes next. I love hearing about the life-long friendships my friend C's girls have maintained from their de Benneville family camp days. And now maybe we're becoming the family leading the way. Twice each year, you can count on us to organize our schedules to make it to de Benneville, to celebrate the mountains, breathe in the pine-scented air, and make memories for a lifetime.

*Neighborhood UU Church holds two retreats a year at Camp de Benneville Pines—winter and summer. Winter Camp is also open to other UU's from the district who would like to join in sledding and snow play activities. For more information on winter camp, please contact Paul Wallace at [pfallace33@gmail.com](mailto:pfallace33@gmail.com)*