INTERVIEW WITH SEAN DAY:

Summer Camp Director

For Sean Day, camp was his first real experience of the outdoors. At age 13, Sean joined his sister at Kamp Kanawana and never looked back. He became a leader-in-training (LIT) and later a junior counselor, counselor, and a naturalist. In addition to working at various camps, Sean gained experience running an environmental education company and was at one time an employee of the Montreal Biodome. He admits that camping has had a huge impact on his life.

YMCA Kamp Kanawana is the second oldest residential camp in Canada and the oldest camp in Quebec. It was founded on the principles of sharing, togetherness, and appreciation for the natural environment. Today it continues to help young people to know themselves and to know each other, while giving them the confidence to make choices in life and to succeed in their endeavours. The camp motto is Non Nobis Solum (Not for ourselves alone).

1) Generally speaking, how is the YMCA a model for youth engagement?

This is something we're looking at closely now. The Forty Assets, which is a whole approach to working with youth, is something that we want to bring in as a philosophy. It looks at the different aspects of youth and the kind of tools we can give them to become leaders in the community. The Montreal Y in particular has a bit of work to do, but there are people actively engaged in doing that. Our longest standing tradition with kids is actually Kanawana, which started 111 years ago. The philosophy we have at camp is giving young people a chance to discover the talents that they have, and the chance to have real responsibility. I have 17 year olds coming to me, ready to give me their right arm so they can work for camp, because we really create a wonderful sense of community and a sense of wanting to give back for all the things that they have received.

2) In your opinion, why do young people attend summer camp?

I think initially, when they come for the first time, it's often the parents who are twisting their arms! But when they arrive at camp they realize that they can exist in a simpler place where people can just be people. Given the contemporary culture for youth right now, there are so many messages: you've got to dress this way, you've got to look this way. Camp allows them to leave all of those things behind; they get to be who they are, they can drop all the trappings of contemporary society. They realize that the world is bigger than getting a Gucci or a Tommy Hilfiger, and that's a great part of the strength of Kanawana. Young people end up feeling a part of something that's important.

3) How does Kamp Kanawana promote youth involvement and leadership?

First, we have a program called the Rangers for 15 year old campers which is a specific leadership program. It's an outdoor experience where they get to discover their limits and do things they never thought they could do, helping them build a sense of self-confidence. Then we also have a two month leadership training program which starts off with a two week canoe trip where each person has to lead the others for a day. They are also trained in group work, children's needs, and how to be a good leader, with lots of debriefing so the learning process is actually a conscious one. We do the same sorts of things in our staff training. So the youth that work for us are really



given a chance to shine. I mean, what could be a greater responsibility than caring for children?

4) How are the YMCA's core values lived out day-to-day at camp?

The ones you always hear about are Body, Mind and Spirit. The first is fairly straight forward – they're out there doing physical things, learning physical skills. I think the camp setting really gives people an opportunity to know themselves physically in a way that they might not get a chance to otherwise. In terms of the mind, there are the challenges we give them organizationally, and to come up with creative programs; but I think it's the spirit that really makes camp such a special place. There is something very magical about camp. And because our approach is really to put responsibility in our staff – and the younger staff too, not just the older "senior" staff – there's an aspect of caring and of really wanting to give back. Of course the YMCA started off as a Christian organization, but we're a non-denominational camp.



5) What do young people learn from working with one another as a team?

By the time you're 14 years old they say you've seen 300,000 advertisements and commercials. Can you imagine if that time was spent just being with people, helping one another, and doing things together. I think what we do at camp is take them away from all those expectations and allow them to just focus on one another and basic human relationships. This creates a real sense of family, and they take those camp values back with them to city life. I've had campers come to me years later and say, "My experience at Kanawana gave me the confidence to go out and start such and such a project – like a recycling program at my school, for example – and now I volunteer and I'm much more active." We plant a lot of seeds at Kanawana and you just never know when or how they're going to germinate.

6) How important do you think it is for youth to be involved in some sort of organized activity?

Every child is different and every child has different needs, but overall I think it's extremely important. Today we live in these isolated pods with little sense of community. What organization does is give you a sense of the whole and of something which is bigger than yourself, which in our culture and our society is something that we desperately need. I wish every child could have a Kanawana, or a Kanawana-like, experience.

7) Does Kamp Kanawana provide the opportunity to engage with international partners?

Ever since I've been involved with Kanawana, we've made an effort to bring in staff from other countries because we feel that it's an incredibly enriching experience for everyone. As of this year we've started a partnership with the YMCA of Mexico City to bring up some Mexican staff to work with us this summer. Our hope is to also have some of our staff go down there and get a sense of that environment, which is another great opportunity for our young people to open up and see another world.

8) How optimistic are you for the future of today's generation of teenagers and young adults?

Are there needs at the moment for youth? Absolutely. That said, there are so many unsung heroes out there – organizations that are doing wonderful things for young people by helping them develop a sense of values. There are times when I read the papers during the year and get a negative feeling, and then I get up to camp and I'll see folks who just blossom and bloom. There are great people doing great things, and they're young. It gives me a great sense of hope – in fact, if I didn't have hope, I probably would not be doing what I'm doing. Organizations like camp help young people realize that they can make a difference.

Interviewed by Allison Anderson
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