

The Esopus Summer Camp Program

There is a Dream Called Esopus

Mr. Todd Stallkamp

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In the mid 1970's, a group of Marist Brothers began a mission to serve an overlooked and ignored population of men, women and children. Once functioning as a training residence for young brothers, the Marist property in Esopus had lost its purpose. The 125 acres along the Hudson River was ready for reinvention. The Mid Hudson Valley Camp is the embodiment of their dream, a dream still alive today.

Over the course of this past summer, the brothers hosted ten weeklong sessions serving this community. Pudding fights and talent shows kept the children of our two special kids camps engaged. Our special young adults enjoyed their prom night and managed to ring in the New Year during their Christmas in August theme week. Adult clients, predominantly from group homes, enjoyed the perfect Esopus vacation of sun, swimming and a break from the city.

From New York's inner city campers swapped subways for paddleboats. Kids from Transfiguration parish in Chinatown, kicked off the summer with lots of fun trips for ice cream and strawberry picking at a local farm. Having no problem with July's humidity, children from the St. Francis School for the Deaf in Brooklyn sought refuge at the pool. In August, boys and girls from the Sacred Heart School in the South Bronx found campfire ghost stories a bit scarier than their local neighborhoods. Sponsored and staffed by St. Helen's Parish in Westfield, New Jersey, children from the oncology unit of Columbia Presbyterian Hospital enjoyed outing to a local fairgrounds and great evenings of entertainment while here in Esopus.

Service requires workers. A volunteer staff has served our campers since the beginning. Recruited mainly through the Marist Brothers' High Schools and associated apostolates, a generation of counselors had matured into many of today's camp directors replacing the original founding men and women. Passing on a legacy of compassion, Christian service and the joy found in this volunteer community. Hundreds of teenagers have brought to life what could be very abstract ideals. After high school and college many of our counselors have found their calling through what they experienced in Esopus.

Teachers, therapists, social workers, doctors, nurses and speech pathologists amongst others are all alumni of Esopus. Many of these professionals have continued to return to camp for a week or more well into their "adult" lives. The vision of St. Marcellin Champagnat to love and serve the underprivileged and marginalized is strong and visible in the Esopus dream.

From **GENE ZIRKEL** ('53): I was blessed with a wonderful Marist summer of 2001, attending the Spirituality Institute in Poughkeepsie and later working in the kitchen in Esopus during the camp run by the Brothers for retarded adults. I am very impressed at the camp. Many teenagers gave up a week of their summer vacation to help. I know from my experiences at the Handicapped Encounter Christ Cursillo weekends that the handicapped can be very difficult. The kids were beautiful, walking their charges hand in hand, calming them down when they were disturbed, taking them swimming, seeing that they ate. Another group of teens worked in the scullery washing dishes for 200 people three times a day. These teens from Molloy, St Francis, Mary Louis Academy, etc. were an inspiration. It is great that the Brothers provide this opportunity for them to serve. While in Esopus I visited the new graves of Lenny, Adolph, and Pat Tyrell, and of course the graves of all

my other friends from the past. I ask all of these saints to pray for me.

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