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Camp Quest: Summer without the prayer

By JIM HAUG

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A boy who did not want to get up from his computer and explore the great outdoors compromised with his father.

"Find me a summer camp where I don't have to pray and I'll go," the 14-year-old told his father.

So he ended up at Camp Quest where it's "OK not to believe in God," said Jim Strayer, a retired biology teacher from Ormond-by-the-Sea who served as a resident scientist and camp counselor.

Camp Quest, which started 10 years ago as a reaction to the Boy Scouts' policy of excluding atheists, is a rarity since even nondenominational camps like to give children some religion.

YMCA's Camp Winona near DeLeon Springs, for instance, tries to accommodate children of all faiths and does not push a particular doctrine, but the camp does have a spiritual component, said camp director David Larrabee.

There is evening prayer and grace is said at meals. Campers who want to explore their faith can participate in a voluntary program involving Bible readings.

Children wanting to avoid religion would "be politely told that this might not be the right mix for them," Larrabee said.

Instead of dinner-time prayer at Camp Quest, children learn about famous free thinkers. The camp makes a game of showing how hard it is to prove or disprove supernatural claims. Invisible unicorns are the camp mascots. The first child who can prove their nonexistence will win \$100 in godless bills, or money printed in the 1950s before adoption of the "In God We Trust" motto.

Nationally, about 29 million Americans identify themselves as having no religion, with one in five of 18- to 25-year-olds claiming to be atheist, agnostic or to have no religious affiliation, according to the Institute for Humanist Studies.

At Camp Quest, Strayer has been involved as both a camp counselor and a patron. He is president of the Humanists of Northeast Florida, which has raised money for scholarships. The cost for the weeklong camp is \$500. Strayer said many children come from low-income households.

Camp Quest has six locations across North America but has not yet found a place in Florida.

The demand is there, but Strayer said humanists have had problems finding the right mix of facilities since Quest Campers do all the traditional summer camp activities like swimming, canoeing and arts and crafts.

Because it does not own property, Camp Quest must lease its facilities, which often leads to some odd pairings, Strayer said.

Christian groups sharing the same campgrounds, for example, have often refused to eat with the nonbelievers, Strayer said.

As a consequence, Camp Quest has had to eat dinner inside a barn or outside the dining hall, Strayer said. "It was OK (to be outside), we had a nice view," Strayer recalled.

Because their children often come from nonreligious households, the camp makes a point of teaching the practices and beliefs of world religions and preaching tolerance for others' beliefs said Amanda Metskas, president of Camp Quest Inc.

Many children who attend Camp Quest have not always enjoyed the same courtesy. They are often mocked at school for not believing in God and told they are going to hell, Metskas said.

If the popularity of atheism books is any indication, acceptance may be growing.

"The God Delusion," a critical book on religion by evolutionary scientist by Richard Dawkins, has sold 500,000 copies. It mentions Camp Quest in a footnote.

Christopher Hitchens' "God Is Not Great" is the surprise hit of the summer, selling 296,000 copies. Hitchens has gotten a new contract to edit "The Portable Atheist," a compilation of essays by writers like Mark Twain and Charles Darwin to be published this

fall.

Strayer, however, thinks the books' popularity only proves only that people like to argue over God. "That's fine," he said.

The retired teacher enjoys a good debate. At Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, he once debated evolution with the creationist and evangelist Ken Hovind. The pastor from Pensacola is currently serving a prison term for not paying his employees' payroll taxes.

Strayer feels fortunate to have avoided religion himself.

"I'm one of the lucky ones," he said. "I grew up in a nonreligious household.

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