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Atheist kid camp must move

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ST. CLAIR TWP. - A summer camp for atheist and agnostic youth will no longer be held at a Butler County campground run by a Christian group.

Camp Quest, whose motto is "It's Beyond Belief!," is one of six small camps nationwide that cater to youths who question religion and the existence of God.

In recent years, Camp Quest held its annual summer camp at the 600-acre Camp Campbell Gard in St. Clair Township, which is operated by the Christian-based Great Miami Valley YMCA.

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Last summer, 31 youth attended the camp. This summer, however, Camp Quest has been moved to a Clinton County park because YMCA officials refused to renew Camp Quest's contract.

"I think they were uncomfortable being publicly linked with atheists," says Camp Quest Board President Amanda Metskas.

But Rick Taylor, Campbell Gard's executive director, says neither publicity nor Camp Quest's secular philosophies played a part in ending the contract.

"They were here for years and we loved working with the group. But it came down to management issues," said Taylor, citing contract provisions that call for all publicity to be first approved by YMCA officials.

In the letter to Metskas canceling the contract, Taylor wrote that he specifically asked her not to conduct any media interviews on camp grounds nor allow photographers in the camp.

Last year, Metskas and a handful of campers met with a reporter away from the camp grounds. Campers provided several photos shot during their stay.

Taylor said the decision to not renew the contract had nothing to do with religion.

"We certainly serve all groups, including those of all faiths and denominations including Muslims, Jews and non-denominational Christian groups," he said.

Metskas contends publicity about the camp, which has included mentions on the Sundance Channel, the "Colbert Report," and ABC's "Good Morning America," prompted the YMCA's action.

Metskas wrote in an e-mail that many people misunderstand the group's mission. "We teach kids it's ok not to believe in god (sic)," she wrote. "(There's) such an unfortunate misunderstanding about atheists. When I spoke with YMCA officials, I pointed out that we at Camp Quest share their four core values of honesty, responsibility, caring, and respect entirely."

Camp Quest's first location in 1996 was the Bullsburg Baptist Church Camp in Northern Kentucky's Boone County.

Camp Quest's mission

"Camp Quest is a not-for-profit educational organization created in 1996. Its purpose is to provide children of freethinking parents a residential summer camp dedicated to improving the human condition through rational inquiry, critical and creative thinking, scientific method, self-respect, ethics, competency, democracy, free speech, and the separation of religion and government guaranteed by the Constitution of the United States."

(Source: Camp Quest Web site at www.camp-quest.org.)

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Metskas said moving to Clinton County may help the group. The Clinton County camp is associated with Ohio 4-H and the Ohio State University Extension Program.

Unlike Camp Campbell Gard, the new location will not require Camp Quest participants to share the area with other groups and will "give us the freedom to be creative in designing new activities."

Besides traditional canoeing, horseback riding, sports and crafts, Camp Quest activities also teach children about rational thought, critical thinking and scientific inquiry.

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