NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Camp St. Charles a place to experience God and his creation

Sharon Abercrombie | Jun. 14, 2013

Jim Bury witnessed his share of conflicts and tense situations in his 25 years as a chief petty officer and pilot in the U.S. Navy. One of them remains particularly vivid in his mind: the opening night of the Gulf War in 1990.

"I was scared and tired," he said. Bury said he calmed himself with a familiar coping mechanism: "I retreated for a few moments in my thoughts to that good place where I was safe and happy." He imagined being back at Camp St. Charles [1], a Catholic camp for children in Newburg, Md.

During times of great stress during his life, "I have traveled the paths of the camp in my mind." Being there, first as a camper, then as a teen counselor, instilled "God's gift of the outdoors and the outdoors in me," Bury said. In practical ways, he added, "It taught me how to get along with people I didn't know."

In Camp St. Charles' 61-year history, Bury is one of more than 30,000 kids who have swam, fished, hiked, molded clay, woven countless pieces of gimp into key chains, ridden horses, walked baby goats, listened to Native American storytellers and "experienced God and his creation" at the camp.

Camp St. Charles was conceived in 1950, when a peninsula of land located in Rock Point, Md., was donated to the Society of the Divine Savior, also known as the Salvatorians. According to a history on the camp's website, seminarians, brothers and priests from Divine Savior Seminary in Lanham spent weeks clearing away much of the dense undergrowth and groves of locust trees that covered the land.

Living conditions were primitive. Shower facilities consisted of four boards nailed to four trees. Water was stored in oil drums, heated by the sun and delivered through a spray nozzle. There were two outhouses, Villa Nova and Villa Romana, located on the waterfront. The seminarians slept in tents as they prepared the camp for its first set of boys.

By 1952, the camp had a permanent mess hall. A chapel soon followed, and the camp opened that summer with 60 boys who slept in tents.

By the time Bury arrived, there were wooden cabins, canoes, a rifle range and a 26-foot Navy ship. Procured from Navy surplus, the boat, named The Herk, was powered by a GM 6-71 diesel engine.

Delighted kids would board The Herk to make late-night sweeps armed with spotlights and crab nets. Many crab fests transpired as a result of these adventures. The camp hired its first women counselors in 1974. In 2001, for the first time, 38 girls joined the roster of attendees.

Bury, now almost 60, first attended Camp St. Charles when he was 8. The place captured his heart. So much so, in fact, that when Bury's dad told Jim he would have to come up with part of next summer's tuition money, the youngster dived into a work regime that had him trimming hedges, mowing laws and shoveling snow. He even started his own jewelry business.

"Dad told me that if something's important to you, you have to have ownership of it," Bury said.

Ownership and love for Camp St. Charles moved him to create similar experiences for other kids. Wherever the Navy sent him, Bury always found a camp that welcomed him as a volunteer.

In the late 1990s, Bury served on a committee of organizers for the Oklahoma City archdiocese's Our Lady of Guadalupe camp while on assignment in the area, he said. The committee was looking for new property for the camp, which met for 20 years each summer at a state campground, said Nancy Housh, director for the Office of Youth and Young Adults for the archdiocese. Bury and the committee found a new plot of land in 1998, and the new Our Lady of Guadalupe Camp opened in 2000. Housh said 1,200 campers have attended the camp each summer since it reopened.

Bury said building the camp was a labor of love.

"I had only one thing in mind: building memories for children," he said.

One of the counselors who helped create the good times at Camp St. Charles is Fr. Glen Willis, 72.

Willis was a seminarian working at the camp in 1961 when 8-year-old Bury first showed up. Willis became director in 1979 and served in that capacity until 1993.

Now chairman of the camp board, the Salvatorian is a weekend associate at St. John the Baptist Parish in Silver Spring. He still comes to the camp to play his guitar and sing songs -- many of them original compositions -- with the current crop of campers.

During his tenure as director, Willis used a $10,000 seed grant to start an endowment fund for scholarships for children who otherwise could not afford camp. The fund now stands at $200,000. Some $20,000 in sales from Willis' 2011 CD, "Moments of Grace," has added to the fund.

Willis and his guitar will be at Camp St. Charles on June 23 for the summer opening.

During a phone interview with *NCR*, Willis shared some of his memories of camp life.

Music has played a large role in his ministry since the principal of a Milwaukee Catholic high school he taught in "took me to a local music store and bought me my first good guitar. He said the gift God gave me should not be wasted with a poor instrument."

In those days, Willis was self-taught. He played at student Masses on an old dusty guitar with a warped neck. It was moldering in a closet when he found it. While tutoring a student who needed help passing his English class, Willis' musical horizons broadened.

"This kid played in a rock band, so I made him a deal," Willis said. "I would tutor him in English if he would tutor me on the guitar."

Music is a wonderful gift, he said. "At camp, singing with the kids after supper was one of my best memories." Among the big favorites? "There's a Hole in the Bottom of the Sea," "My Father Abraham" and "May the Circle Be Unbroken."

Singing is also popular with the families who come to see their children on visiting Sunday, he told *NCR*. Willis ends Mass with a blessing of animals -- gerbils, rabbits, lizards, goats, sheep, birds of all shapes and sizes -- and everyone sings, "Lay Your Hands Gently Upon Them."

Critters play a major role in much of the camp life. A dozen horses roam in a field next to a big old wooden picnic table where Willis and other priests have offered Mass after lunch each day. There is a petting zoo on the campgrounds.

Before it blew down in a bad storm, an old locust tree, dubbed by one of the priests as "The Listening Tree," was the gathering place for kids and counselors. Willis said the tree paid tribute to a former counselor, Br. Gilbert Beresford.

"He personified the Salvatorian mandates of goodness and kindness," Willis said. "Every night after dinner, Brother Gilbert would sit under the tree and talk; but more than that, he would really listen to the kids. I learned a lot from him about what it means to really listen. The wonderful world of children opened as they shared a thought about a pet that was sick and a grandpa who was dying of cancer. At that age, they are the same reality." After the tree fell down, the camp directors put up a plaque on the spot.

Trees. Turtles. Rivers. Horses. Willis emphasized that Camp St. Charles is committed to preserving the earth in all of its manifestations, "and it strives hard to help children develop an appreciation for God's creation by showing them how to take care of the world around them."

Often, it is the children who become the teachers. Willis remembers one instance when a group of campers found a little dead sparrow and brought it to him. Could they have a funeral ceremony? "Meet me on the beach at 4 p.m.," Willis told them.

When they arrived, Willis started to dig a little hole in the sand. "One little guy saw three eggs, and before I could stop him, he picked up the eggs, and a baby turtle began to pick its way out. And then another kid said, 'Look at that. One thing dies and another is born.' "

Creation awareness is everywhere at Camp St. Charles, and it has kept up with the times, recently becoming involved in a major recycling effort. Laura Hall, the camp director, said the camp has gotten rid of water bottles and gone into food composting via a composting bin and the resident pot-bellied pig. The kitchen staff uses real dishes instead of paper plates and cups. As a result, the annual trash collection bill has gone from $6,500 to less than $2,000, Hall said.

Hall has camp memories of her own. Before becoming the camp's director, she was a counselor. Also on the staff was a young man from England. The two fell in love, got engaged and held their wedding at Camp St. Charles with Willis officiating.

When their second son was born seven years ago, Mom and Dad brought their baby directly from the hospital to the camp. The family lives on the grounds during the summer, so their boys are building their own memories of Camp St. Charles.

Willis and Hall are hopeful more generations will remember Camp St. Charles and send their own kids there in the future. But attendance is currently down because the economy is suffering in the Washington, D.C., area.

"People are taking 'staycations' at home," Willis said. "Camp is a luxury for many of our families. We are holding on, hoping to make it through these lean times to our 100th anniversary."

In the meantime, contributions to the camp and sales of Willis' music CD would help. For further information, go to the camp website [1].

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