

## Sixties Spirit Alive at a Maine Camp

Ron Furst created a summer camp where kids learn tolerance and self-confidence

WHEN RON FURST graduated from BU in 1969, it was expected that he would take over the family paintbrush factory. But Furst was everything his father didn't want him to be — a philosopher, a dreamer, a hippie — and he had other plans.

Influenced by BU's politically outspoken professors Howard Zinn and Murray Levin, Furst (SMG'69, SED'75) decided to open a private psychotherapy practice to help troubled children. During the summers, he left his affluent hometown of Newton, Massachusetts, to lead teenagers on wilderness adventures through the mountains of Colorado and Wyoming. "In the wilderness, I saw teenagers grow into healthy, tolerant, and self-confident individuals," he recalls.

Those experiences eventually led him to Raymond, Maine, where in 1986 he purchased Camp Hawthorne, one of the oldest camps in the country. Situated on 120 acres of pine forest, the ramshackle establishment, built in 1919, had fallen into disrepair, with broken beds, leaky boats, and rotted docks jutting into the lake.

But Furst saw only possibilities. "Kids today live such isolated lives," he says. "They're afraid of dirt, they're afraid of nature. It's important that they learn to trust and enjoy one another." And so Furst taught himself how to wire electricity, install plumbing, and cook for 100 people. He took on every job, from camp director and bus driver to nurse and psychologist.

Even today, Camp Hawthorne is not a fancy place; there are no sprawling lodges, no tennis courts, and no riding stables. The lakeside cabins are small, rustic, and furnished with sagging bunkbeds, and the mess hall still needs a bit of updating. But what the camp lacks in amenities, its campers make up for in creativity. And that's the whole point. "Imagination is highly valued," Furst says. "Just as importantly, we foster a culture of joy and community spirit by teaching tolerance, social responsibility, and fair-mindedness."

An elaborate dream catcher hangs between two trees, with driftwood, branches, and pinecones caught in its enormous web. Colorful murals adorn the buildings, and brightly painted totem poles, rocks, and benches crafted by campers from years past are scattered throughout the grounds. Even a trip to the bathroom is an experience: tiny Christmas lights twinkle from the ceiling, and the walls are stenciled with silhouettes of John Travolta, à la *Saturday Night Fever*. "It was part of a camp beautification project," Furst explains.

The camp follows an egalitarian system: campers rotate chores, such as dishwashing and gardening duties, and activities are never categorized according to age. They range from the traditional — archery, sailing, canoeing, arts and crafts, filmmaking, drama, mountain biking, and rock



Ron Furst, owner of Camp Hawthorne, in Raymond, Maine, says he tries to foster a culture of joy and community spirit.

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climbing — to the less conventional: at night, campers can wander to the lake to listen to beatnik poetry at Joel's Coffee Haus, and on Sunday mornings they gather in an outdoor chapel for a short, nature-oriented service. "People say the spirit of the sixties is nothing but a faded memory," Furst says. "But I see it reflected in the eyes of our campers every day."

Furst has watched generations of campers grow from children to adults. Indeed, many return as counselors, and one, Cullen McGough (CFA'99) is currently the assistant director. "Camp is such a formative experience," Furst says, "because it is the first place where children create a world for themselves outside of their families."

On a rainy Saturday night, the lodge is filled with campers dancing to disco music. "Our dances are kind of legendary," Furst says, his arms flailing to the beat. "The only rule is that everyone has to go stag."

Dressed in an outlandish costume pilfered from the drama department, a counselor coaxes a reluctant camper onto the dance floor. Everyone is smiling. The music pulses, the lights flicker, and the walls reverberate with the pounding of heels. And in the center of the crowd, Furst dances. **VICKY WALTZ**