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### 365 Gay: Features

# For a gay old time, go to ‘Camp’ Camp

By Jenny Hagel, special to 365Gay.com

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**"It was a place I could go and feel comfortable and be myself."**

Forrest Clift can't wait for summer camp.

For one week this summer, he'll live in a cabin, sing songs in a dining hall and swim in a lake. It'll pretty much be like every kid's experience at summer camp.

The difference?

Forrest Clift isn't a kid – he's 41. And he isn't going to just any summer camp – he's going to "Camp" Camp.

Founded in 1997, "Camp" Camp is a week-long summer camp for GLBT adults. And when they say "summer camp," they mean it.

"The purpose we serve is to allow grown ups to be kids for a week," says Associate Director Susan Clinkenbeard.

"Camp" Camp's location in southwestern Maine is complete with bunks, a mess hall and a camp store. Campers sign up for activities like pottery, hiking and "Yarn Time." They also spend the week preparing acts for the Talent/No Talent Show because, let's face it, camp wouldn't be camp without skits.

And at night? Campers attend dances, of course. In fact, in addition to insect repellent and seven pairs of underwear, the packing list encourages campers to bring "flashy outfits and costumes" to wear to the evening festivities.

There are a few differences between "Camp" Camp and your regular summer camp, though. For starters, you have to be at least 18 years old to attend. And, unlike the summer camps you remember from childhood, "Camp" Camp doesn't require campers to participate

in activities. You can fill your time with structured events, or spend all day lounging by the lake. And “Camp” Camp prides itself on serving non-camp-like (i.e. good) food.

More importantly, though, the camp provides GLBT adults with an opportunity to socialize outside of the traditional gay scene.

“We try to offer an alternative to the booze and bods element of the community,” says Clinkenbeard, who goes by “Clink.” (It’s her camp nickname – remember those?) “It’s a healthy alternative,” she says, “and people really take to it.”

In fact, “Camp” Camp was originally conceived of as an alternative to the gay men’s bar scene.

Over the years, though, it has grown into something more. According to Clift, his first year at “Camp” Camp was so overwhelmingly positive that he was often moved to tears.

“It was a place I could go and feel comfortable and be myself,” says Clift, “and I didn’t necessarily have that in my life at that time.”

Suzanne Blackburn, a camper returning for her third year, was drawn in by the tightly knit “Camp” Camp community. “The activities are great,” she says, “but I think the essence of it – what really keeps me coming back – are the people.”

“Camp” Camp also encourages campers to challenge themselves. “It’s a safe place for people to be creative or be a beginner,” says Clinkenbeard. “They can step out and try something new in an environment that’s supportive.”

Clift agrees: “It’s hard not to go there and feel changed in some way.”

Another benefit of “Camp” Camp is that it provides an opportunity for gay men and women to interact. A letter from a camper posted on the camp’s website reads, “As a gay man, I don’t exactly surround myself with lesbians all the time....But at ‘Camp’ Camp it’s so different. We’re all in it together.”

Clinkenbeard says she hears comments like this all the time. “When you think of how the bar scene is mostly segregated, people are happy to discover something that was missing but they didn’t realize was missing – socializing with men and women.”

That integrated “Camp” Camp experience doesn’t end when everyone goes home.

“The community exists not just during the week of camp but all through the year,” says Blackburn, with campers meeting up around the country for parties, holidays and weddings.

This year, camp takes place August 24th through 31st, and there are still spots available. There is no registration cut off, so participants can register at [www.campcamp.com](http://www.campcamp.com) until August 23rd. The \$965 registration fee includes food, lodging and activities.

Campers willing to work at the camp or lead activities can become part time staff members in exchange for a reduced fee. Approximately 200 campers attend each year from around the country, and even overseas. According to Clinkenbeard, 30 percent of those campers are couples and 70 percent are singles, so “it’s a comfortable place for singles, but it’s not a singles scene.”

And, while some campers register with their partner or with friends, many campers come alone. “Camp” Camp is structured to ensure that campers who come by themselves feel comfortable.

Why should someone go to “Camp” Camp?

“Because,” Clinkenbeard says, “they’ll have a really good time. Hopefully they’ll make a lot of new friends that they’ll keep beyond the week of camp. And, if all goes well, they’ll be able to stretch into new parts of themselves and come away with a feeling of accomplishment.”

When Forrest Clift packs his seven pairs of underwear and heads for Maine this August, he won’t just be going for the canoeing or the croquet.

He’ll be going for the community.

“It may sound cliché,” Clift says, “but it really is a family of people who are there to lift you up and help you succeed....It’s not something I want to do, it’s something I need to do because it renews my spirit.”