

Camp Ahimsa Brings The Outdoors To City Kids

By Janice Steinhagen

For a group of kids from inner-city Hartford, their time at Camp Ahimsa in Voluntown was a week of firsts.

Their first time picking raspberries. Their first swim in the ocean. "The first time catching a fish," said camp Director Christopher Doucot.

Doucot has been bringing children from The Hartford Catholic Worker's St. Martin de Porres House to the secluded camp on the grounds of the Voluntown Peace Trust for 20 years, he said. The youngsters, who attend the camp in sessions sorted by gender and age range, spend most of the week trying their hands at traditional camp activities like kayaking, scavenger hunts and crafts.

The camp's mission is to give kids a positive, fun summer experience and a taste of life beyond the streets. Older kids who have attended camp before are often trained as counselors to serve as responsible, positive role models in their community.

Often, being surrounded by nature for the first time is a revelation for the kids. "The air has no smell," said Ashanti, 13. "It doesn't smell like pollution. It just smells like air."

St. Martin de Porres House, run by the nonprofit The Hartford Catholic Worker, provides food, clothing, and shelter for people struggling with poverty. It also offers after-school recreation programs to help keep kids engaged in positive activities. Doucot and his wife, Jacqueline, are live-in staff at the home, on Clark Street in Hartford.

Doucot said that over the years, townspeople in Voluntown have been cordial to the campers.

"We've met plenty of good people here who have been welcoming of us," said Doucot. Residents have invited the campers to swim in their pools or taught them to fish.

But there are some who have been less than welcoming to the campers, Doucot said. He mentioned an incident in which campers were called a racial slur while swimming at Finn Beach.

While he heard the comment, the campers didn't, Doucot said.

"For the most part, [racial slurs] just roll off them," said Doucot, who is white. "They have to survive in this world. But it doesn't roll off me. There's a whole lot of good people out here. But if you put a teaspoon of salt in a cup of water, it ruins the whole cup. The fact that people begrudge these kids a chance to dip their toes in God's grandeur is despicable."

Racism is "something the town's not going to condone," said Voluntown First Selectman Robert Sirpenski.

"There's a perception that Finn Beach is a private beach for Voluntown residents only, and it's not. The beach is open to anyone, he said.

Father Ted Tumicki, pastor of St. Thomas-St. Anne Catholic Church in Voluntown, echoed Sirpenski's sentiments. "I am appalled that people would say such things. There is no place for racism here or anywhere," he said.

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