

By AVRUM ROSENSWEIG

Peace and love at Camp Manitou

The 1960s was a decade when love and peace were in the air and flower power convinced millions that we could change the world forever. It was an idyllic time.

This past summer, I was reminded of some of those tranquil feelings when I visited Camp Manitou.

Camp Manitou is owned and operated by Mark and Jeff Wilson, two very soulful guys. It is an expensive place to send your children, and I was expecting the stereotypical rich kids' camp with attitude and wardrobes befitting Paris Hilton. What I found among the campers instead was a deep sense of warmth and caring in which love abounded.

Camp Manitou, meaning "place of great spirit," is indeed a beautiful place with all the amenities one would want. It is described on its website as being "nestled in the great northern forests of Muskoka, carved out along iridescent blue lakes and rivers."

Indeed, Camp Manitou has superlative

facilities and activities, including the Manitou Tennis Academy, progressive art programs and theatre, but the attraction to the place seemed to come more from the very positive energy I sensed everywhere.

My re-evaluation of the camp began when I spoke to the campers by the waterfront, helping to launch community week, when campers and staff visit nearby towns assisting in tikkun olam activities.

I spoke about the gift these kids have being able to attend a northern Ontario paradise and reminded them of the impoverished Israeli children and terrified children in Darfur who would never have such an opportunity. They listened closely, and it was evident by their attentive looks that they agreed. Later, dozens of Manitou staff and campers told me with great sincerity that they understood how fortunate they are.

At a counsellor-in-training (CIT) work-

shop, I listened to story after story from the CITs about their response to our world's humanitarian needs. Not a single voice espoused the view that the homeless are grubby and deserve the life they live. This was unusual, as this hardened view is frequently expressed by some young people in groups I speak with.

The morning after my arrival, I saw a young man sitting by my cabin playing a guitar. We played some blues together and soon enough a group of five or so other staffers joined us.

Over the next hour, I listened to their unreserved and honest descriptions of Camp Manitou. They said Mark and Jeff bring a certain tenderness and kindness to the place that can be felt throughout the grounds and within the cabins.

One girl said the first day she arrived at camp, she was terrified at not knowing a

single person. To her delight, the campers in her cabin greeted her with hugs and kisses, welcoming her to a summer that would ultimately change her life.

The older campers, I was told, and was witness to, were dedicated to helping the younger ones. It was wonderful to watch a nine-year-old camper run up to a 15-year-old, hug her and then be lifted in the air and spun around. Love was everywhere. I could hear it, see it and feel it.

I think Camp Manitou is the real deal. At the camp, helping others grow seems to be more powerful than raw competition. Things such as scaring the younger kids late at night and drug problems do not seem to be inherent in the fibre of the Camp Manitou experience. Quite the opposite.

I believe that what exists at Camp Manitou is an authentic communal bond, similar to the one of the 60s, that allows young people to learn about love, beauty and understanding. I only wish I could be young again so I could experience it for an entire summer of my own.