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MAKING A SPLASH Happy campers dive into Little Bear Pond at Camp Wekeela in Maine, one of several summer camps owned by Ridgewood residents.

Creating Camp Memories

Three Ridgewood couples share a passion for planning their summer camp seasons

BY JOYCE VENEZIA SUSS

Ephram Caflun has a Mason jar filled with ashes on the desk at his home office in Ridgewood. Visitors sometimes nervously inquire about those ashes, and if they do, Caflun breaks into a big smile.

The jar holds special memories, he says, that go back many years. The ashes are not of a deceased loved one, but the remains of written wishes tossed into the last campfire of the summer at Camp Wekeela in Maine, owned by Caflun and his wife, Lori.

That jar is a huge inspiration for Caflun, one of several Bergen County residents who own summer camps. Other camp owners who live in Ridgewood are Jeff and Cindy Grabow of Camp Echo in Burlingham, N.Y., and Todd and Rebecca Rothman of Deerkill Day Camp in Suffern, N.Y.

They all describe the challenges of working “10 for 2,” or spending 10 months planning for two extra-busy months. And they all agree that Bergen is an ideal location for conducting business during the off-season.

CAMP WEKEELA

At Camp Wekeela in rural Maine, hundreds of children are far away from the lure of the Internet and the pressures of homework. On any given day, they might be crafting “shaving cream” paintings, bouncing along the water atop a “banana boat,” cruising down a zipline to the cheers of their friends, belting out funny songs in the dining hall or just relaxing under shade trees on a hot day.

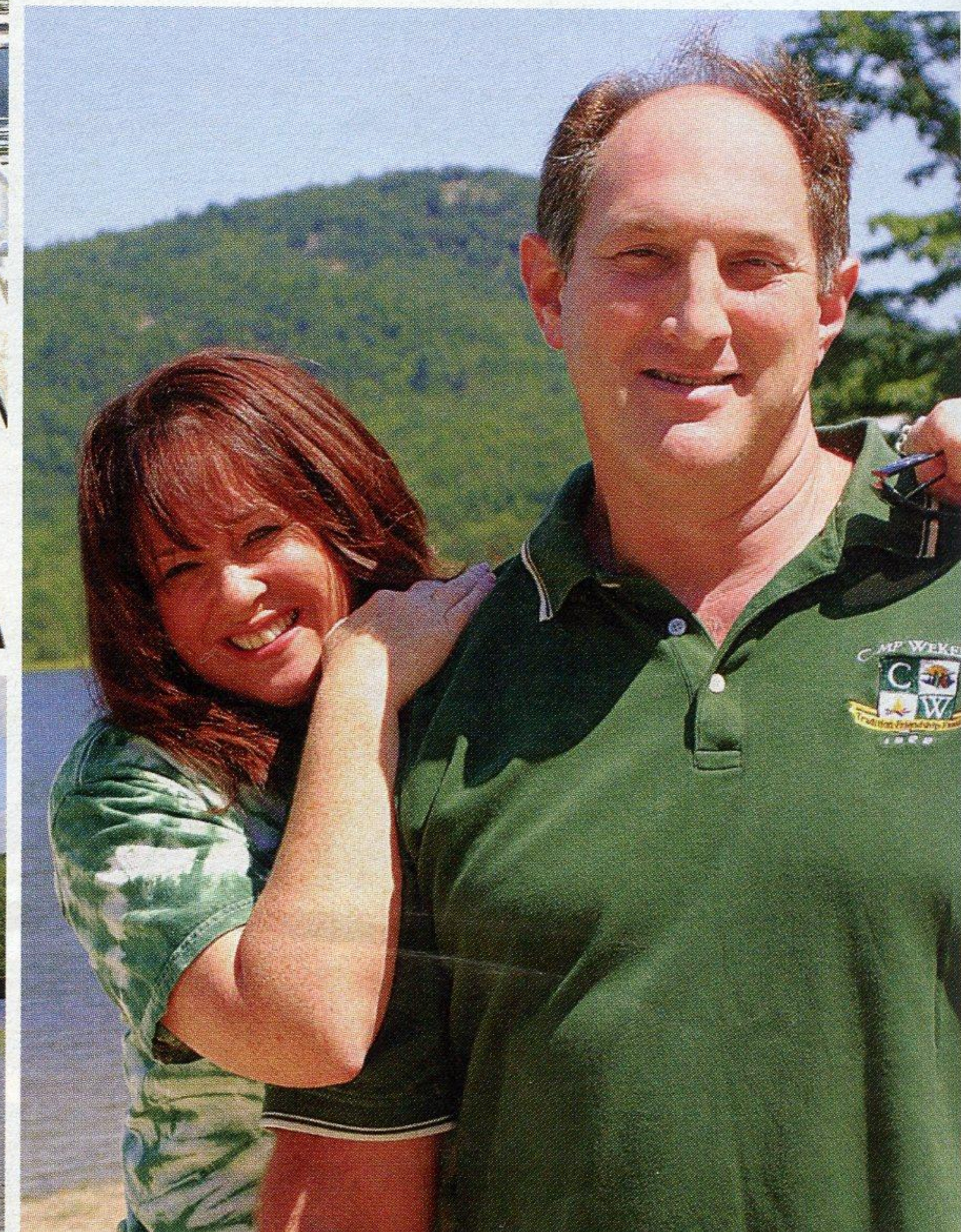
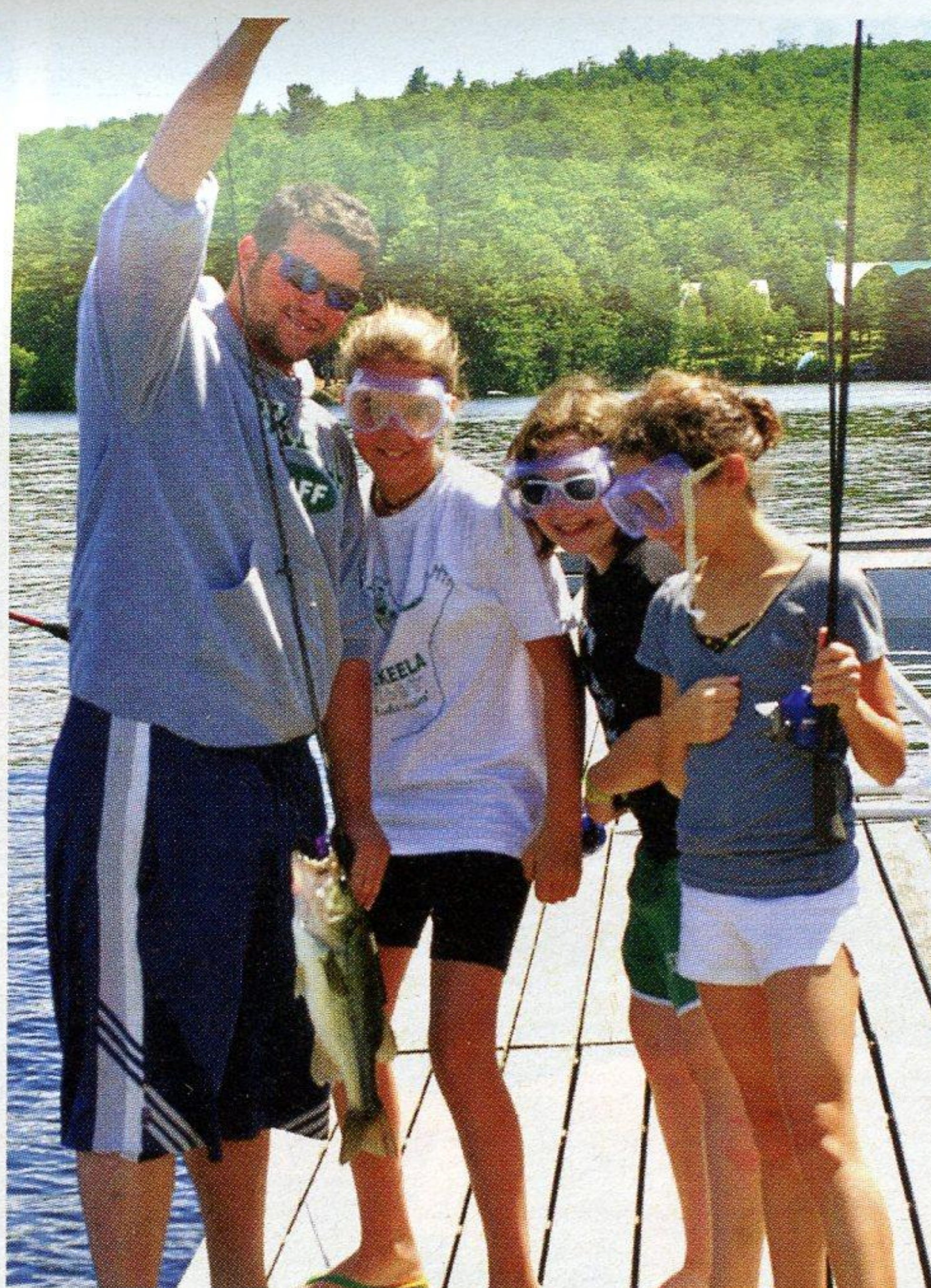
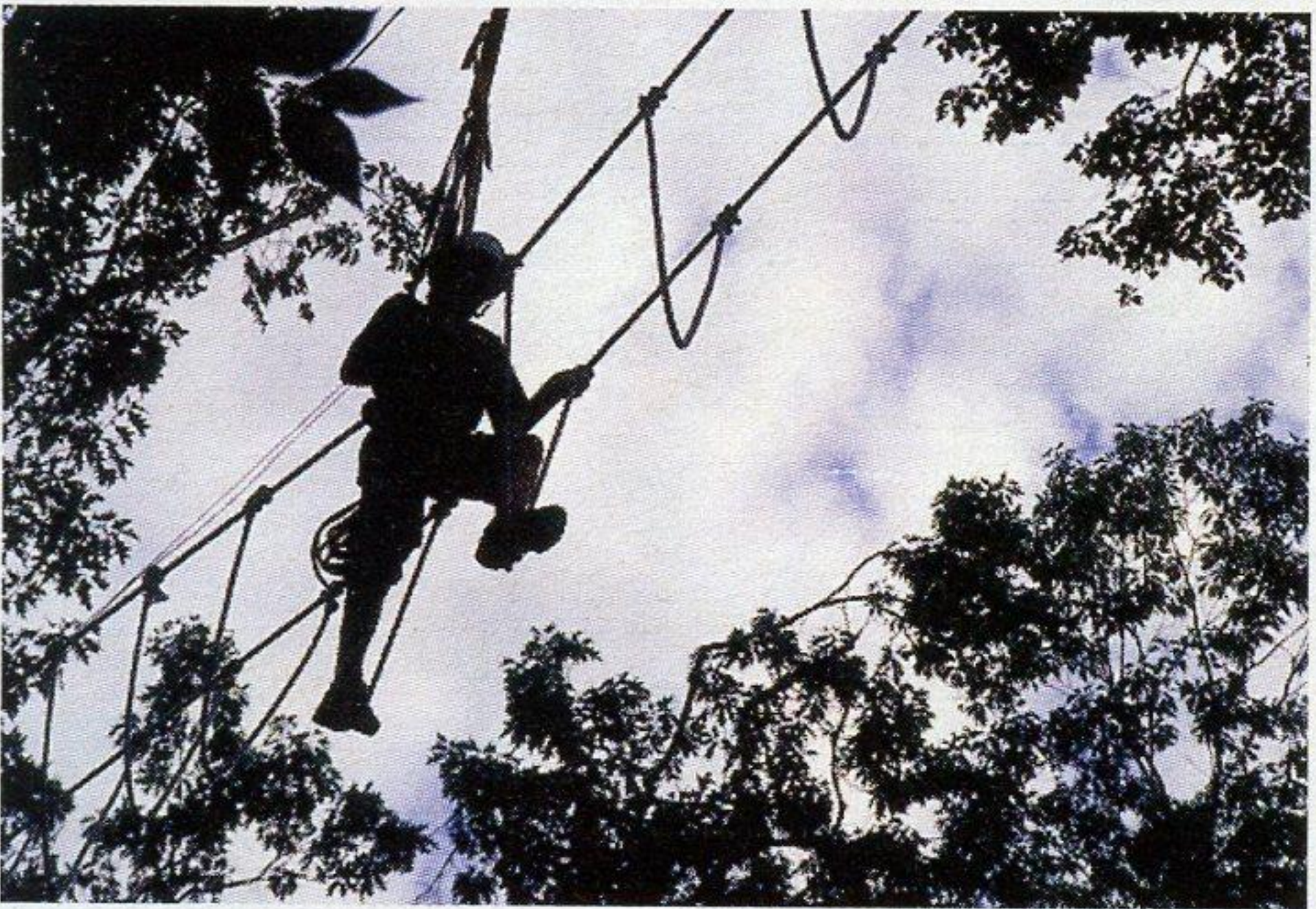
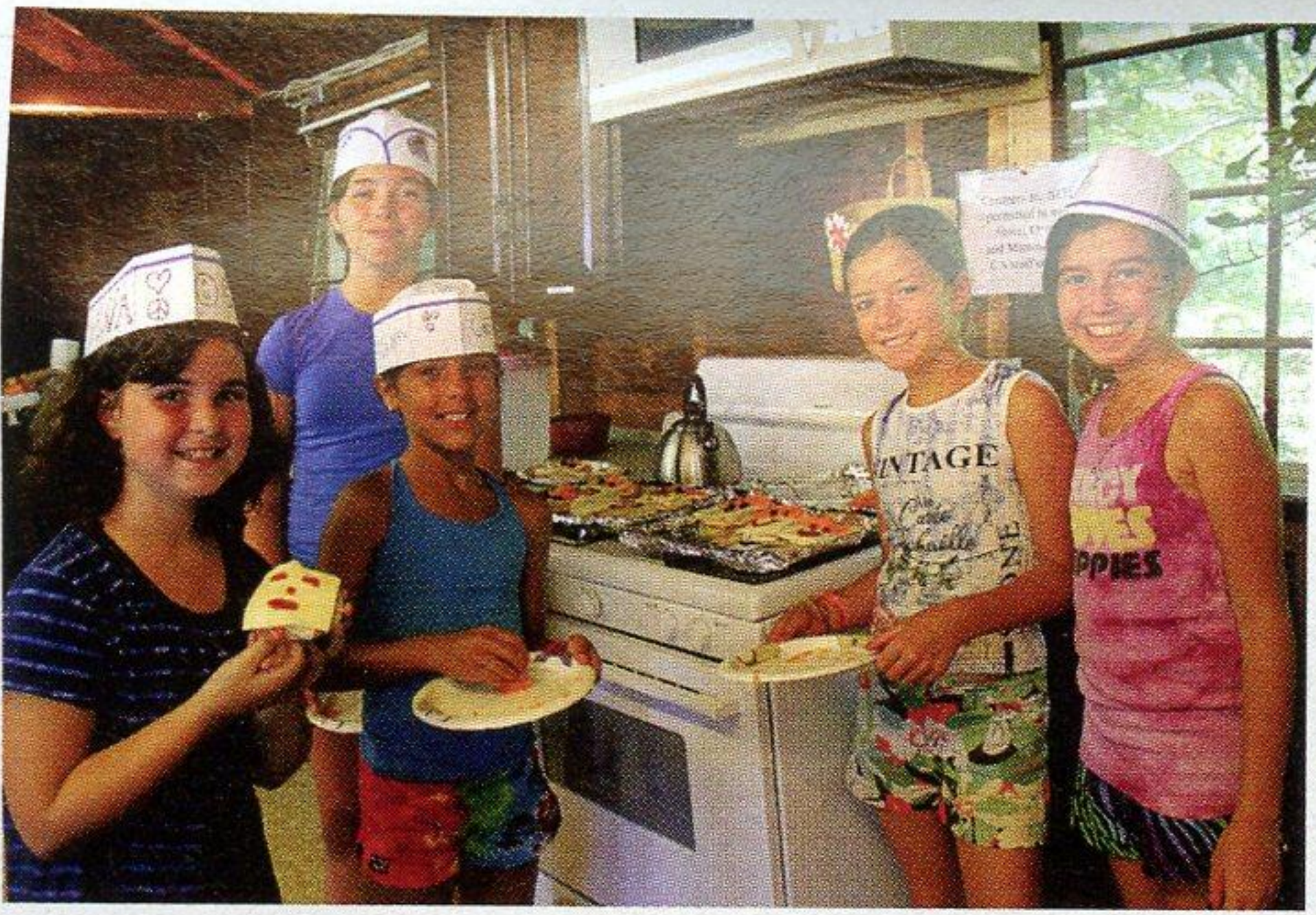
“We are not a specialty camp,” Caflun says. “We offer many different things,

including land sports, water sports, water-skiing, tennis, outdoor adventure, performing arts, culinary arts, environmental education and much more.”

Adding to the experience is the international flavor of the camp. “We have children and staff who come from 20 different states in the U.S., and about 10 different countries,” he says.

At sleep-away camp, Caflun says, children learn “independence, self worth, self confidence, self esteem and the value of making friends. They do get those things at school, but we deliver them 24/7. When you are living together in a bunk, you get to know your friends much more.”

And the counselors, he says, “in some ways have a more profound impact on children than they have with their parents at



FUN IN THE SUN Lori and Ephram Caflun, right, leave Ridgewood every summer and move to Maine to supervise hundreds of children who attend their summer camp. Among the many activities at Wekeela are sailing, fishing, sports, culinary and craft programs and an outdoor adventure zone with high-and-low rope elements and rock climbing.

home. ...One of the most important aspects of being a counselor is being a role model."

Hiring good counselors is just one part of the off-season, when Caflun spends long hours in his Ridgewood home office.

"Running a sleep-away camp is a business," he says. "I'm recruiting campers and staff, doing marketing, managing the website, and I'm in frequent communication with our current families and alumni. I handle the vendors, order supplies, set up the food service, plan the entire summer's program calendar," including overnight and day trips.

During the winter, Caflun is also "in constant contact with our facilities manager. Maine has very harsh winters, so they are not just plowing but removing snow from rooftops because the buildings are not winterized."

Although the Cafluns love Maine, they live in Ridgewood for the good schools and its easy travel access.

"When you are in the business of taking care of other people's children, it's really important to hit the road and visit those families," he says.

Caflun has only one regret about not being in Ridgewood during the summer: "I miss the Fourth of July events here," he says, although Wekeela has a beach luau and fireworks to celebrate the holiday.

DEERKILL DAY CAMP

Deerkill Day Camp in Suffern, N.Y., was

"Camp may be the only environment where a child can unplug and have face time."

EPHRAM CAFLUN,

OWNER OF CAMP WEKEELA

founded in 1958. Today, it is owned and operated by Todd and Rebecca Rothman, with Rebecca's parents, Robert and Karen Rhodes.

Deerkill has about 650 campers ranging in age from 3 to 15, attending over various sessions. Older campers may move on to a sleep-away or specialty camp, Rothman says, but many of them will spend at least part of the summer at Deerkill.

Day camp is "very different from resident camp experiences, because we live in the community that we serve. I walk down the street and see our kids all the time," he says.

Summer camp "provides opportunities that kids don't necessarily get in a structured school setting," Rothman says. "Camp is not just learning how to do tie-dye, make a clay pot or kick in karate. It's about becoming more independent and taking the first step

away from your parents in a safe and supervised environment."

Two months at summer camp allows children to be "unfettered by classroom standards or testing regimens," he adds. "They are learning a new skill or putting their head underwater for the first time.

"With today's parents focusing more on protecting their children from – rather than exposing their children to – the world, it becomes harder for our children to become self-reliant," Rothman says.

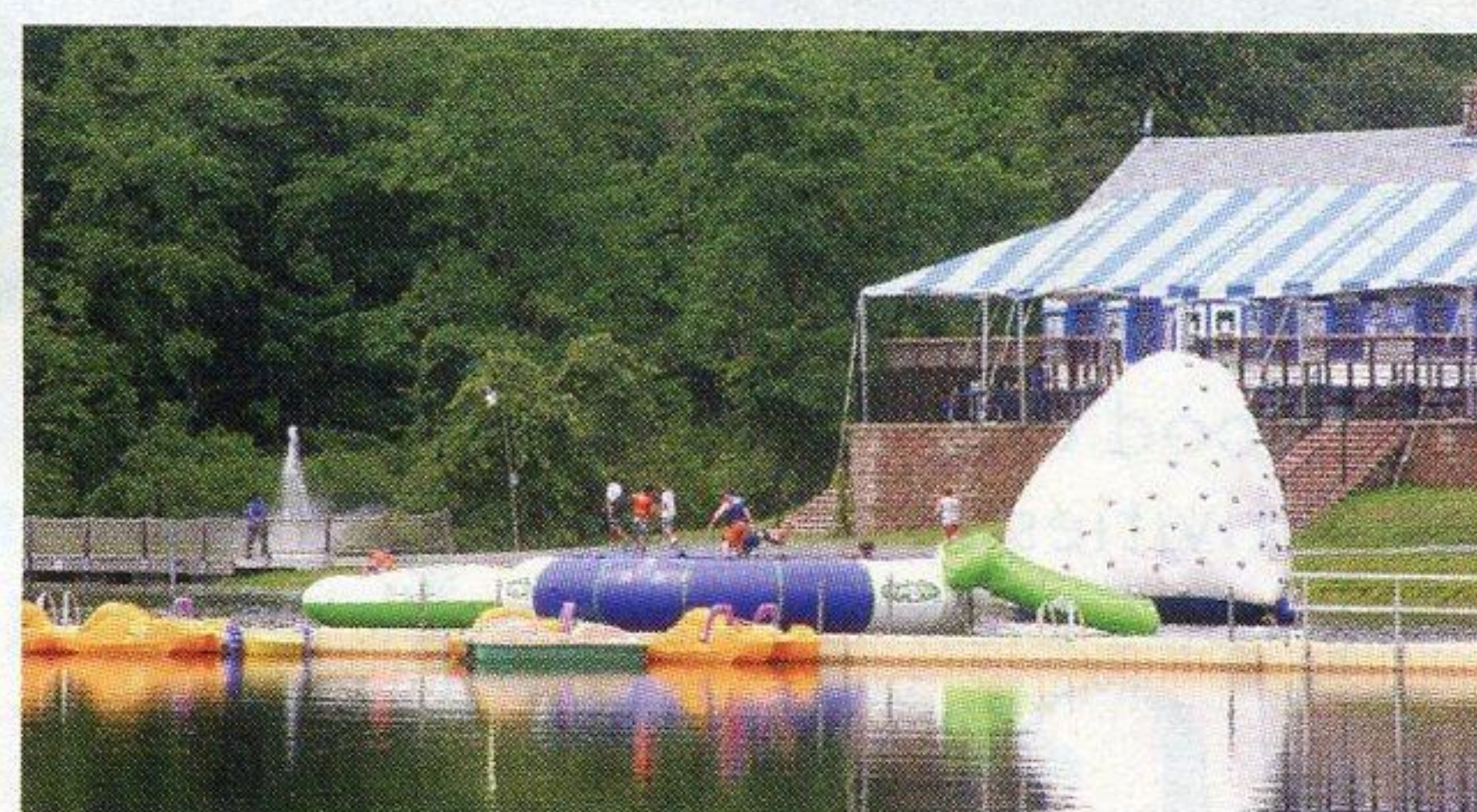
Being a camp owner is a "reverse" experience from many traditional jobs. Back in Ridgewood, "September becomes our summer, when we take our break," he says.

From his home base in Ridgewood, Rothman visits families, attends camp fairs, hires staff members and supervises an on-site maintenance staff that makes improvements year-round.

The toughest part of the job "is the inconsistency of a regular schedule," he says. "Starting April 1, we are in high gear. It's very analogous to planning a wedding."

In his youth, Rothman was both a camper and a counselor.

"I always loved camp, but I never imagined I'd marry someone whose family owned a camp," he says. "I've worked on Wall Street and in Congress, but I wouldn't trade this job for anything. It's something that's very unique, and I don't take one day of it for granted." ➤



SUMMERTIME CELEBRATION Cindy and Jeff Grabow (lower right) with their children, Jordan and Ellie, are owners of Camp Echo in upstate New York. Campers enjoy inflatable water slides and trampolines, a high ropes course and all the rituals of summer camp, such as flag-raising ceremonies.

CAMP ECHO

Jeff Grabow of Camp Echo also attended camp as a child. He “grew up” and held jobs in the textile industry, real estate and as part owner of a local restaurant. But “I woke up one day and realized what I was doing and wanted to make a difference,” he says. “I wanted to wake up and never ‘work’ a day in my life again.”

Grabow is quick to note the joke about “work,” because owning a summer camp and caring for more than 350 children is definitely not a summer vacation.

“There’s never a down time,” he says. “Once camp begins, I’m working 17 or 18 hours a day, and we never take a day or night off. I don’t have my own table – I eat with the kids. I rarely drive around in a golf cart.”

Camp Echo is “a traditional, all-around camp” that lets campers take electives in areas they might want to try, such as athletics, arts, theater and more.

Camp Echo’s philosophy “is that we are in child development, but we don’t want the kids to realize that,” he says.

During the winter, “I think most people envision camp owners sitting by a pool somewhere for the rest of the year, with an

umbrella in a drink,” Grabow says. “But from the second camp closes, the next season begins. I have construction projects going on all the time. I need to replenish staff members. I’m finding trainers for the high ropes course. I’m booking the fireworks show. I need to meet with new families, and I’m always adding to our programming.”

The only difference during the off-season, he says, “is that I’m not waking up in the middle of the night with immediate issues.”

Every June, Grabow leaves Ridgewood and returns to camp to start “prepping” the 200-acre property with a pre-season crew: opening pools, raking leaves, fertilizing grass, mending fences and cleaning cabins. First-time campers arrive a few days before the returnees “so they have a chance to settle in, so it’s not so new to them,” he says.

One of the best things, Grabow says, is the magic of doing something different every day for two months every summer. “Camp days are like snowflakes,” he says. “No two days are alike.”

BACK IN RIDGEWOOD

The three camp owners say they are friendly with each other.

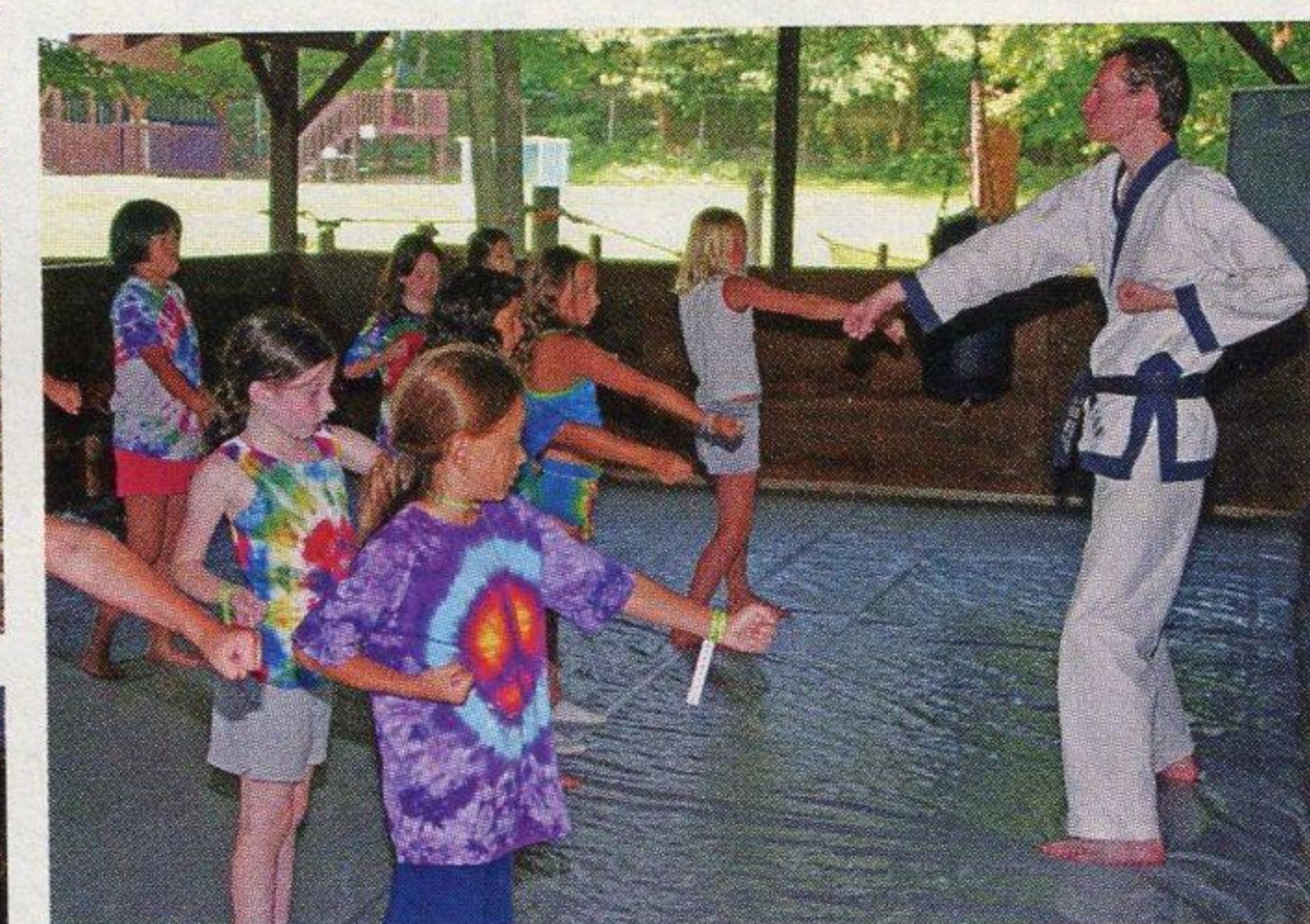
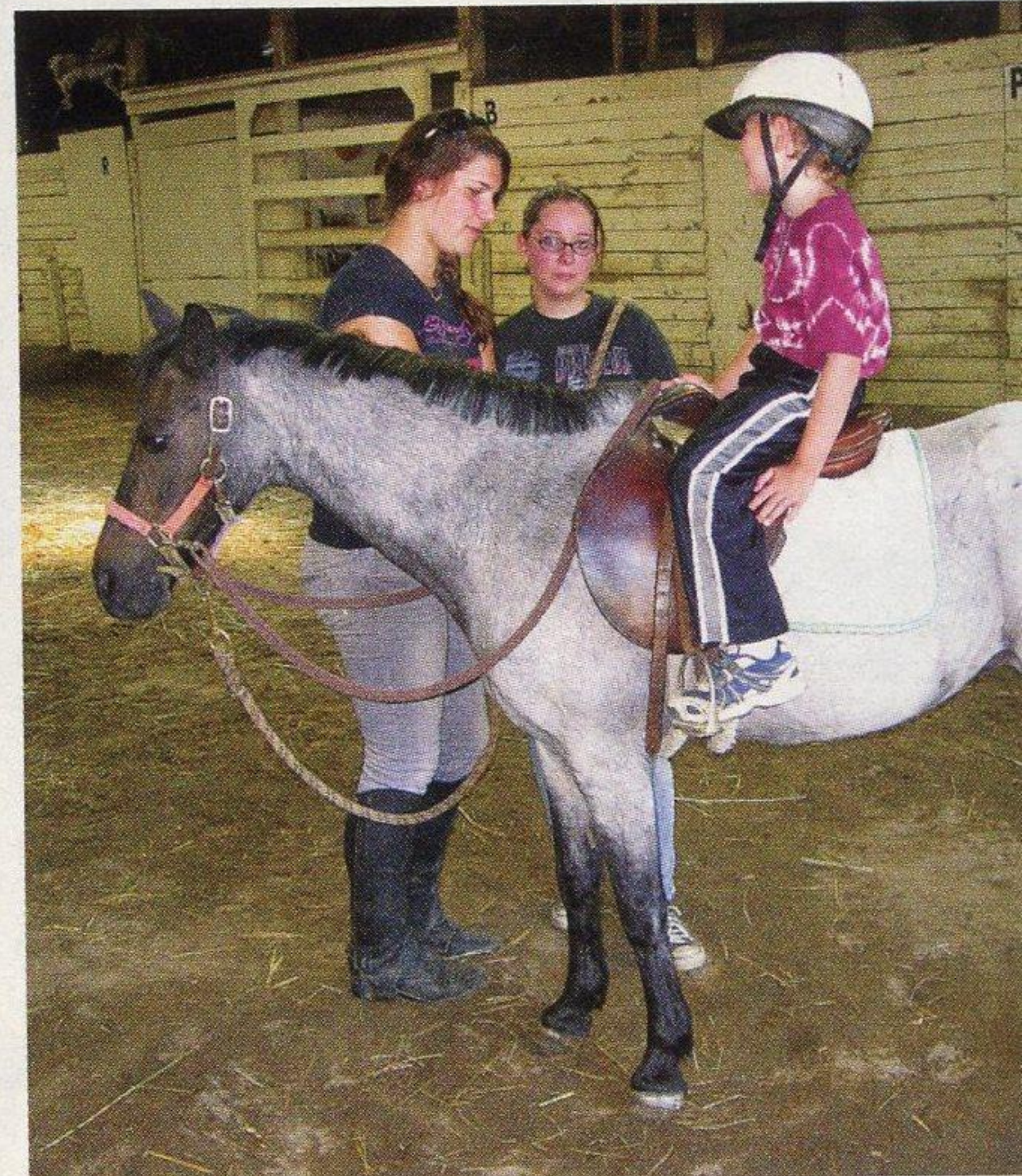
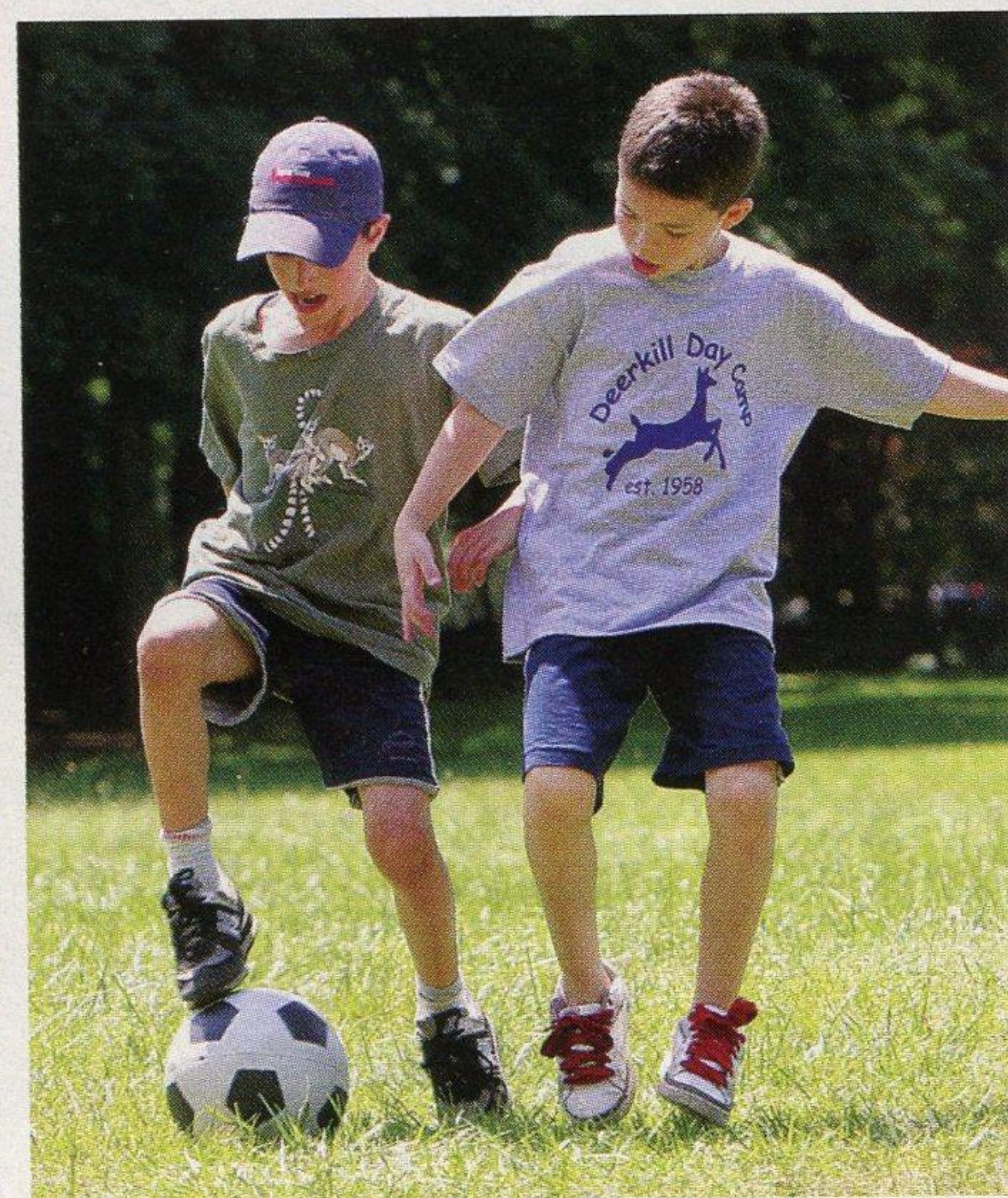
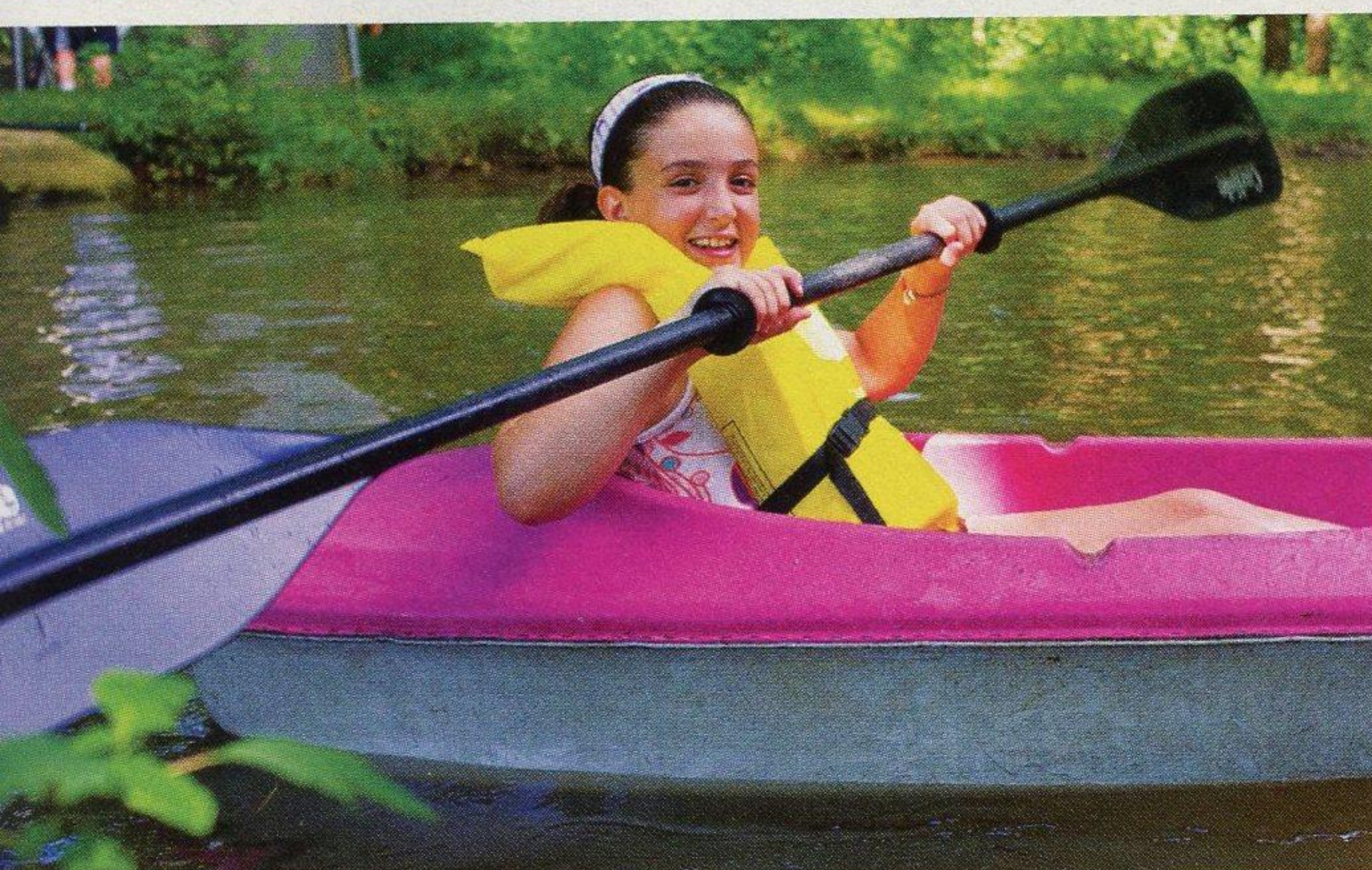
“We cross-pollinate,” Caflun says. “At times if I’ve filled all my staff positions, I will pick up the phone and tell them I have extra applications in case they need more people.”

Each camp “has its own culture” that attracts different campers, he adds.

Grabow says, “We realize we are all working with children and not competing with each other, because we have a finite amount of space. We talk about evening activities and programs that work or don’t work.”

All three men agree that the toughest part of running a camp is the last day. The final campfire is especially poignant, Caflun notes, because some campers are “aging out” and some counselors “have to go out into the world and get so-called ‘real’ jobs.”

Rothman says, “Every year, when the last bus leaves on the last day, we are back at square one, with zero campers and no programming in place. ... You are happy because you have had an incredible summer, but there’s a fair amount of sadness too. But all those happy memories carry you through the winter.” ■



ABOUND WITH ACTIVITIES Deerkill Day Camp is a family affair: Robert Rhodes and his wife, Karen, took over the camp from Robert's parents. The camp is now run by their daughter, Rebecca Rhodes Rothman, and her husband, Todd, with the newest generation, Isaac and Henry, in the wings. Like many summer camps, a wide variety of activities are offered, including swimming, kayaking, sports, horseback riding, archery, karate, crafts and special events.