

Beyond Belief - Summer at Camp Nageela Midwest

By Yiska Kahan

Some things you have to see to believe. You can hear about the beauty of a butterfly, but you will never fully understand its delicate elegance until you see a monarch's wings stretched in flight. A mother will describe her child's adorable face, but you will not grasp the full charm until you see his sparkling eyes and pink cheeks.

The most common word people use to describe Camp Nageela Midwest is "unbelievable." Campers look forward to the program and excitement, parents are amazed at the dedication and love of the staff, and everyone agrees that a season at Camp Nageela is truly unbelievable.

We spoke to a few summer visitors who went down to the Indiana campus to see for themselves.

People are shocked at what Camp Nageela accomplishes. Eli Davis, an active board member, invited a friend to spend time at the camp. It's a very impressive campsite and he was visibly amazed by the exquisite grounds.

"But I told him, you can't really appreciate the beauty until you understand what is going on with these children," says Eli.

Just then, he stopped to talk to the campers and saw the transformation for himself. The children, each from a different city, described how they got to Camp Nageela and how much they gained from being there.

On an emotional high from having just completed the fifth summer season, Rabbi

can count their success.

"We spend time with these kids and they absorb the meaning of *Yiddishkeit*," says Rabbi Factor. "We've helped close to ten children move from public school to a Jewish day school, thanks to the Nageela influence."

Campers come from twenty-six states across the country to join the Nageela experience. Some are newcomers, who experienced *Shabbos* for the first time this summer. Some children are back for their second or third year, like the group of girls who called a supervisor down to their bunk house on a Friday afternoon. It was the first *Shabbos* of camp and they wanted to make sure that their outfits were appropriate for *Shabbos*. These are children with almost no connection to *mitzvah* observance, yet they understand that *Shabbos* at Nageela is special and they try their best to take part.

Several *Shabbosos* over the summer are graced with the presence of Dayan Shmuel Fuerst. A driving force in the opening of Camp Nageela, Rav Fuerst makes it a priority of his to spend as much of his precious time as possible in the camp.

Lily Feiger of Deerfield, Illinois, took her Torah commitment a step further, celebrating her *bas mitzvah* with the entire camp. Lily's mother, Alyson, describes the event as full of sincerity.

"You had this room full of girls, and it was such a party," she recalls. "Everyone

exceptional day, and this year a new innovation was introduced: family *Shabbos* meals, where the bunks were grouped with a staff or visiting family. Each table had its own *bechers* and *challah* covers, set up like a regular *Shabbos* meal. For children who have never experienced a family *Shabbos seduah*, this was an eye-opener. The children witnessed Totty *bentching* the kids and making *Kiddush*. They saw the family interaction and love for each other. This was a valuable lesson in Torah family life that can only be learned one way - by experiencing it.

Yosef Knopf, a board member, learned some lessons of his own on *Shabbos* at Camp Nageela.

"There's a special *ruach*, an excitement," he says. "Kids are dancing and clapping. I saw a camper get up on a chair and spontaneously break out in a song. Some moments were very emotional. At the singing by the ebbing of *Shabbos*, one boy stood up and told his personal story. His mother had been very ill and he went through a hard time. He made a promise that if his mother would get better, he'd collect money for a *Sefer torah* for Camp Nageela. The warmth and support they showed this boy was just amazing."

A major highlight of the summer was the dedication day on July 24. Nageela celebrated the opening of the new Simcha Davis Dining Hall and Yahav Recreation Center donated by the Davis and Yahav

kids.

Moshe Davis, a board member, was overwhelmed by the Nageela enthusiasm.

"I was blown away by the *ruach*! The dedication of the staff is very impressive," he said. "They have so much energy. It's non-stop excitement. And I could tell they are *kiruv* professionals. They have it down to a science how to get the kids involved and keep their attention."

Reb Moshe also had the honor of naming several campers. Over the summer, eight girls requested to be given Jewish names. They spent time with their counselors choosing names from *Tanach* that spoke to them. At *Minchah* on *Shabbos*, Reb Moshe made the *mishebeirach*, transforming Michelle into Michal and Lily into Leah. This kind of involvement is typical of Nageela. Every staff member, from the mother's helpers to the cooks, gets involved with the campers. They are teachers, mentors and role models.

The effect of one summer can last a lifetime. Yossi Meystel, a board member, was touched by the spirit and enthusiasm that Nageela campers have for doing *mitzvos*.

"Here are children who were never exposed to *Shabbos* in their lives," says Yossi. "And they come home after the summer wanting to go to a Jewish school."

The influence spreads beyond the children. The Nageela office received a phone call last week from one concerned parent.



1. A Camp Nageela Midwest camper greeting Rav Avrohom Chaim Levin upon his arrival at the camp. | 2. Rabbi Dovid Schnell, presidium member of Agudas Yisroel of Illinois, speaking at the dedication ceremony at Camp Nageela Midwest. | Rabbi Paysach Krohn with Camp Nageela Midwest campers. | Rabbi Yitzchok Ehrman, director of Camp Nageela Midwest, with Rav Avrohom Chaim Levin.

Yitzchok Ehrman, camp director and controller of Agudas Yisroel of Illinois, takes tremendous pride in what they've been able to accomplish by reaching out to unaffiliated Jews. The children have an amazing camping experience and then continue with the year-round programs. They keep in touch with their dedicated counselors throughout the year.

"We have parents calling up asking for programs in their area and we're seeing more involvement with the whole family," says Rabbi Ehrman.

Rabbi Ehrman explains that 95% of Nageela campers attend public school, and many of them live far away from any Jewish community.

"These families weren't looking for *kiruv*," he notes. "They chose a Jewish camp for their son or daughter, and when they see how happy their children are, they want to maintain that relationship. All parents want their children to be happy, and parents can connect the happiness at Nageela with the true happiness of *Yiddishkeit*."

Kiruv efforts don't usually show immediate results. One can't always tell when a Jewish spark is ignited. But this year alone, Rabbi Nosson Factor, assistant director and director of the year-round programming,

was dressed up. They had fancy food and music. But it was also so meaningful - the speeches and the whole atmosphere. These people were so authentic. We couldn't believe the effort they put in to this celebration."

Nageela offers a *bar mitzvah* and *bas mitzvah* program, with mentors who learn with the children during the year leading up to their big day. The children look forward not just to the celebration, but also the preparation that goes into it.

The spiritual aspect of the year-round connection begins with *Shorashim*, the time after supper spent in one-on-one discussions with mentors and teachers. Rabbi Factor describes the scene, with the sun setting and the girls grouped in pairs, sitting on the grass, on benches, and in the bunkhouse, learning and talking. Some will discuss basic *mitzvos* and *Yomim Tovim*, while some learn about *chessed* and *bein adam lachaveiro*. Each camper has a chance to connect and study on their level, whatever their interest. And this discussion is ongoing throughout the year. Counselors keep in touch with their campers, learning on the phone, attending *Shabbatons*, and finding other ways to keep the connection alive.

Shabbos at Camp Nageela is always an

families. Special guests included Rav Avrohom Chaim Levin, *rosh yeshiva* of Telshe Yeshiva Chicago, and Rabbi Paysach Krohn, noted speaker, author and *mohel*.

The arrival of Rav Levin to Camp Nageela was awe-inspiring. The campers lined up to shake his hand. Many of the children had never seen a *gadol* before, and they displayed tremendous *kavod* and reverence.

Rabbi Krohn spoke about the importance of the camping experience and what an opportune time it is to reach out to children who have no affiliation with *Yiddishkeit*. He emphasized that the way to reach people is through love and friendship.

In the Simcha Davis Dining Hall, Rabbi Yosef Davis spoke about his son Simcha's natural inclination for *chessed* and making other people happy. It's appropriate, he said, that this dining hall, a place of laughter and giving, be dedicated in his name.

The dedication event coincided with visiting day, so the parents were able to sense the community's involvement in Camp Nageela. It was most impressive for parents to see how devoted people are to the camp, and how much they care. The parents realize that this is something special. They appreciate the depth of commitment that Nageela offers. It's more than just a fun summer for

She wanted to know who was learning *Chumash* with her son over the summer so that they could set up a weekly learning session throughout the year.

Just last week, Mr. G., a business-owner, during his regular inspection of one of his nursing homes, was approached by a woman.

"Are you Orthodox?" she asked.

"Yes," he said.

"My children have just returned from Camp Nageela Midwest and we have decided to pull them out of public school and send them to day school. Can you help me?" she asked.

Within 24 hours, Camp Nageela, in conjunction with Rabbi Yosef Cohen and "Generations," the Margolits from Arlington Heights, Illinois, were meeting with a local day school principal. In just a few days, they will start their morning learning Torah. This is just one of the many cases in which Camp Nageela Midwest has sparked the *pintele Yid* in not only the children, but in the parents of Nageela campers.

People come for the beautiful campus and resort hospitality, but they walk away amazed by the *ruach* and authentic love and caring *kiruv*. This is what you realize when you come to see it for yourself.