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Newsday

Llife

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PRIDE of PLACE

CAMP GA'AVAH IS A SPACE WHERE LGBTQ+ KIDS CAN FLOURISH **E2**

ALEXIS BUATT-RAMOS / HYPHEN PHOTOGRAPHY

act2 | How do you know when it's time to retire? **INSIDE**

free to be themselves

LIFE IN



Director Ellen Diamond, rear, and Friedberg Jewish Community Center camping services director Stephanie Abrams helped launch Camp Ga'avah in 2018.



A camper places a handprint on a door painted with an LGBTQ+ theme in 2021. The camp is conducted at the Henry Kaufmann Campgrounds in Wheatley Heights.

Camp Ga'avah (Pride)

WHEN | WHERE June 28 to Aug. 19 at Henry Kaufmann Campgrounds, 75 Colonial Springs Rd., Wheatley Heights
COST \$680 a week or \$4,000 for the whole eight-week program. This year the camp is launching a leadership-in-training program that costs \$2,000 for eight weeks.
INFO 516-634-4164, friedbergjcc.org

ON THE COVER. A show of hands at Camp Ga'avah at the Henry Kaufmann Campgrounds in Wheatley Heights in 2018.

Henry Kaufmann Campgrounds alongside other types of day camps run by that JCC. Approaching the rustic cabin feels like slipping into another world, separate from Long Island's highways and suburban developments. Set back down a hill, its four colorful rainbow pride flags stand out amid the gray bark of the tree trunks and the green leaves on branches. Picnic tables outside the cabin give campers a place to gather. It's another world that LGBTQ+ campers and their

allies need, camp leaders say. The camp offers activities typical to any other summer day camp, but through what leaders call "a queer lens." Arts and crafts might include making pride banners celebrating lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer people. Field trips have included going to Ellen's Stardust Diner in Manhattan, where Broadway hopefuls sing and dance on the tables in addition to waiting on them, followed by a Broadway performance of "The Prom," a musical about actors who travel to a conservative town to support a lesbian high school student prevented from taking her girlfriend to the dance. The last



Jordin Womack, 17, of West Babylon, a Camp Ga'avah counselor in 2021, participates in a sweet activity.

week of camp is Drag Week, when gay culture is celebrated by guest drag queens who teach the campers their art, bringing makeup, wigs and costumes.

Camp Ga'avah is repeatedly

called a "safe space" by campers, counselors and administrators. What they say they mean is a space where campers can be themselves, where they can build self-esteem and see

adult LGBTQ+ role models.

"You don't have to worry as much that people are going to judge you there, thinking it's weird or unnatural to like the same gender or change your gender," Onyx said. In fact, you get to celebrate who you are, Onyx said. "You don't really get a lot of chances to be proud of yourself in that way."

THE 'BIG IDEA'

In 2017, the UJA-Federation of New York ran a contest called Big Idea and invited JCCs to compete for a \$250,000 grant to serve disenfranchised groups in the Jewish community.

Stephanie Abrams, now director of camping services, and others from the Friedberg JCC sat around a table to brainstorm. "The former camp director said, 'We do day camps pretty well. What about a camp for LGBTQ+ kids?'" Abrams recalled. The JCC entered the competition,

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STEPHANIE ABRAMS

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Discovering who they are

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proposing an eight-week session.

The submission didn't win. But the UJA-Federation was so taken with the idea that it funded a one-week pilot program during the summer of 2018, granting the JCC \$40,000.

"We wanted them to start with a smaller program to make sure this was something that had teeth," said Anna Bennett, a planning manager in the federation's Jewish Life Department.

Teeth it had. Camp expanded to four weeks in 2019 and ran for seven weeks in 2020 despite the pandemic, albeit at the JCC's building in Oceanside instead of in the woods. Last summer, camp expanded to eight weeks and moved to its own cabin, where it will be again this year. The first year there were eight campers; this year 25 have signed up so far. Though Camp Ga'avah is a Jewish camp — campers celebrate Shabbat on Fridays, for instance, and talk about such values as *kavod* (kindness) and *tzedukah* (charity) — campers don't have to be Jewish to attend. Campers range from 6 to 17 years old.

Ellen Diamond was running an after-school program for the JCC when the organization found out the camp was being given a shot. Diamond's supervisor knew she had a transgender son and asked if she would be interested in becoming Ga'avah's director.

Her response?

"It sounded amazing to me. I will tell you what people always ask: 'Why do you need a queer camp? Shouldn't camps just be more inclusive?' For these kids, all year they're in the minority. All year they're trying to fit in socially at school. We hear through the summer all sorts of bullying stories that go on in the schools.

"At least for the summer they can be in a place where they can relax and be who they are," Diamond said.

Other Long Island groups catering to the LGBTQ+ community praised the camp.

"Summer camp is one of those great American traditions," said Maria Demauro, community mobilization coordinator for PFY, formerly



Lizzie Rabin, 20, left, of Long Beach, was in 11th grade when she saw a poster at school advertising Ga'avah. Above, Rabin at a camp graduation. Now she is a camp counselor.



Ga'avah camper Logan Goch, 15, identifies as nonbinary: "You could say I'm a person ... 'Person' is my favorite." At right, Logan at home in Merrick with their mom, Jen Chasin.



known as Pride For Youth, with offices in Bellmore and Deer Park. "We go to summer camp during our most formative years. Summer camp can be a difficult experience if you are different or you don't fit in."

UJA-Federation of New York owns three campgrounds, and Ga'avah spawned two more shorter such camps last sum-

mer at the UJA's other locations — one in Rockland County run by Manhattan's 92nd Street Y and one in Staten Island run by Manhattan's 14th Street Y.

Lauren Wexler, director of children's enrichment and engagement at the 92nd Street Y, saw Abrams give a presentation about Ga'avah at a UJA event. "It was an aha moment.

"We're in Manhattan. Why aren't we doing this? We met with Stephanie ... She walked us through how they built the program."

While multiple sleep-away camps serve LGBTQ+ young people, Abrams believes the UJA camps are the only day camps in the region dedicated to LGBTQ+ campers. A search by the American Camp Associ-

ation of New York & New Jersey did not locate any others, said Jess Michaels, the association's director of communications.

MY 'SCHOOL VOICE'

It's turned out that a number of campers at Ga'avah are transgender — shedding the gender they were born with and embracing the other or



ALEXIS BLATT-HAMCOX / HYPHEN PHOTOGRAPHY

In 2018, just another day at Camp Ga'avah, which is believed to be the region's only day camp serving LGBTQ+ young people.

nonbinary, not identifying as either male or female. Others are just not straight. Camp programming focuses on both gender identity and sexual identity, Abrams and Diamond said.

Abrams likes to describe the difference between gender and sexuality to parents this way: Gender is who you go to bed as. Sexuality is who you go to bed with.

Lizzie Rabin, 20, of Long Beach, has been with the camp since its first summer, first as a camper and now as a counselor. She was in 11th grade when she saw a poster advertising Ga'avah's inaugural week hanging in Long Beach High School. Rabin describes herself as cisgender female — meaning she identifies as the gender she was assigned at birth — and bisexual. She uses the pronouns she/her or they/them.

"The first year I identified as lesbian," she said of her first

year at Ga'avah. When she arrived at camp, she thought that because she was attracted to females, identifying as lesbian was her only option. But camp helped her realize she could be attracted to females and males — she didn't have to choose one or the other. "Especially with other kids at the camp having their stories about questioning, it helped me with how I wanted to identify," she said.

One camper, she said, is at camp because her mother is a lesbian and wanted her daughter to get to know other people who are gay.

Rabin said she thinks trans kids have an added challenge beyond questions of sexuality. "It's a very big change on the outside," she said. "A lot of people have a lot of questions, want to get all up in your business. You want to just be supported by people who get it."

Altering gender identity

involves more than just how trans people dress, Rabin said. They may think they don't walk manly enough or femininely enough, Rabin explained. Or they may feel their voice is too high or too deep, she said.

Logan Goch has had those feelings almost since birth. Assigned female at birth, Logan identifies as nonbinary and prefers the pronouns they/them or he/him. Logan's mother, Jen Chasin, 51, an acupuncturist, prefers to use "he" for Logan because "they" drives me crazy grammatically."

"When kindergarten started, I would drop him off and he would say, 'OK, I got to put on my school voice,'" Chasin said, explaining that "school voice was deeper."

"He didn't correlate it with male or female. He just felt uncomfortable with his little-girl voice at school. It confused me because I thought there might be some psychiatric

problem. Does my child have multiple personalities?"

FIRESIDE CHATS

In later grades, Logan would have no interest in going to girls' princess-themed parties. "The boys weren't inviting him either because he was a girl. It was a little difficult socially," Chasin said.

Between fifth and sixth grade, "I started wanting to buy a chest binder," Logan said, something they have since stopped wearing because of potential health risks. It was after Logan met a child transitioning from female to male that they thought, "Maybe this is what I am. Maybe this is what's going on."

Logan's next step involved their long, curly black hair. "Beautiful, thick, gorgeous hair," Chasin said.

"I still have it," Logan

protested — but now it's cut to the shoulder. Logan plays with their hair while talking, winding a curl around a finger. In 2019, while at Ga'avah, they began using the name Logan instead of their birth name, also called "dead name" in the trans community.

Logan's favorite part of Ga'avah — this will be Logan's fourth summer — is what the camp calls Fireside Chats. Campers gather around the firepit to talk about topics of interest. "It's not lit, obviously, because it would be really uncomfortable in the blazing heat," Logan joked.

During Fireside Chats, campers express their feelings about coming out or how they are treated in school, or they might learn about the new law allowing people to choose an X for their gender instead of M or F on a New York driver's

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ALEXIS BLATT/FRAMOS/RYPHEN PHOTOGRAPHY

At Camp Ga'avah, toasted marshmallows are still a summer camp staple.

Free to be themselves

COVER STORY from E5

license. Adult role models from the LGBTQ+ community might visit camp to speak to the campers. "A lot of the discussions we've had in camp really opened up my mind," Logan said.

HELPING PARENTS, TOO

Many parents struggle with their children's LGBTQ+ choices, such as changing a name or look. "This is challenging as a parent," said Onyx's mother, Kristen Pfeffer, 44, a yoga instructor and nanny. "It's outside the box."

When Onyx told their mother about the name change from the one she and her husband had carefully picked out for their baby, Pfeffer had a hard time. "I spent days crying over it. But I spoke to somebody who is an adult and nonbinary. They said, 'Please don't take it personally.'"

When Onyx asked their mother to call the school over the summer and alert them to the name change, Pfeffer initially said no. "I wasn't sure about it. I felt like it was a camp thing," Pfeffer said. But Onyx persisted, and Pfeffer and the family have adjusted and are supportive of Onyx.

"I have been asked a couple of times, 'Could this be influenced by social media? Is it a phase?' Honestly, I answer the same way — that my gut is telling me that this is right for Onyx. I actually had fear that if we didn't accept this, it could lead to depression, to not communicating with each other."

Pfeffer's fear is not unfounded, said Gloria Lebeaux, director of social work for the Friedberg JCC. "The research shows there's definitely a higher rate of suicide, addiction, depression, anxiety, all these areas in children and adolescents who identify as LGBTQ+. Camps like Camp Ga'avah are so important to offer these kids connection, inclusion and acceptance."

David Kilmnick, a social worker and president of Long Island's LGBT Network, agreed. "LGBTQ young people are three times as likely to attempt suicide or



"A camp like this ... is really important to prevent suicide and harmful behavior," says David Kilmnick, president of the LGBT Network.

JEFF BACHNER

harm themselves. A large reason for that is not having the safe spaces they need.

"Having a camp like this ... is really important to prevent suicide and harmful behavior. It's the environment that needs to be changed, not the kids," Kilmnick said.

During the school year, Camp Ga'avah holds sessions and reunions for parents and campers, with parents in one room and campers in another. Now, Pfeffer is on board with her child.

She gets choked up talking about the family's experience. "Onyx is a lot happier with family support and open communication. The most important thing as a parent for me is to make sure your child is happy with themselves."

"It doesn't affect anybody what gender they choose or what sexuality they choose. So why not be on board?" she said.

This summer, Pfeffer has volunteered to lead Tranquil Tuesdays at Ga'avah. Each week, campers will experience a different wellness option, such as aromatherapy, yoga or journaling.

Pfeffer's path isn't unusual, Diamond said. "As you get more comfortable, you become more free, and a lot of people become fierce advocates for their kids," she said.

In fact, Pfeffer and Onyx had to end their Newsday interview in time for Pfeffer to drive Onyx and three of Onyx's Ga'avah friends to a Friday night coffeehouse for LGBTQ+ youth run by PFY in Bellmore.