

The Day Camp That Launched St. Paul's Adaptive Recreation Program

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It seems like every time Twin Cities Public Television has a pledge drive, they haul out concerts and documentaries designed to hit us baby boomers right between our nostalgic eyes. And it works. I sing along to the greatest hits of the '60s done by aging Motown stars and whichever of the Beach Boys are still able. Patti Page and the McGuire Sisters make an appearance to bring in the oldest of us. And then there are the folkies. Judy Collins, looking and sounding lovely as we look back on our lives, finally able to see "both sides now."¹ The documentary on the Carpenters has now made it into the canon. But for me, this goes beyond nostalgia, scooping up my heart and putting it down in another time and place. And all because of one song, their first hit, "Close to You."²

A Job with the City of St. Paul

The year was 1970. I had just returned home to St. Paul from a year of teaching music in the Detroit Public Schools and in need of a job. I had just about enough money to buy a couple of 35 cent taps at Schweitz's Bar and see if any of my old friends had any leads on work. Someone did.

"The Recreation Department is always looking for summer workers. They don't pay much but you spend the summer playing outside," offered my friend the parole officer. We were very young. We didn't need much money but we did need fun.

The very next day I made my way downtown to the courthouse on Kellogg and asked for an application. He was right. Recreation was hiring. I wrote down my recent work history and it looked pretty good. Teaching music in the big bad Motor City. As an afterthought, and just to give myself a little point of distinction, I added that as part of my teaching schedule I taught a



class of Special Ed students, then referred to as mentally retarded, once a week.

I handed my application to the clerk who read it right then and there. As I was headed out the door she called me back. "Can you stay and interview right now?" she asked brightly. "Sure," I said, all dressed up for an interview in shorts and a t-shirt.

She brought me into the office of the department head, Gerald Prill.³ It just so happened that they did have a job for me, and I could start right away. The City of St. Paul and the St. Paul Association for Retarded Children (then SPARC, now called The Arc) were planning to collaborate on a seven-week summer day camp project using the city's park facilities and equipment, administered by SPARC. "You will be one

The author and a few of the women from the Nor-Haven Home, a residential home for developmentally disabled women, enjoying some free time at Newell Park. *Courtesy Rebecca Sanchelli Sandsmo.*



Camper Eddie at Newell Park ready for a game of Duck Duck Gray Duck. Courtesy Rebecca Sanchelli Sandsmo.

of two paid employees,” he said, “but you will be in charge. The department will assist you in any way we can.” He handed me a pamphlet on adaptive recreation and the phone number for the contact person at SPARC. And there I was. Hired and trained.

It wasn’t until decades later that I would learn more. According to the City of St. Paul Bureau of Parks and Recreation Annual Report for 1968, there was a six-week summer day camp program started that year at Newell Park.⁴ I was not told of this at the time and was never connected to whoever oversaw it. I presume that the collaboration with SPARC began in 1970. Also, the city of Roseville had a similar program up and running, but as their camp dates were the same as St. Paul’s, I had no chance to observe, and it never occurred to me to call the director, also a music teacher.

Getting Started

I met with the SPARC contact, Marie Nelson, who was in charge of coordinating the program and she filled in some of the gaps. The collaboration came about, she said, because a number of parents of what were then described as retarded children in St. Paul had made a very solid case that, as tax-paying residents of the city, their children too should be provided with free and accessible summer activities including adaptive recreation for the disabled. Who could

argue with that? No one. This was a very worthy project. Everyone seemed to be in agreement on the mission: a good experience for a group of people who are so often overlooked. But how to achieve that goal? You have to start somewhere. So they hired a twenty-something with a smattering of experience for \$2.50 an hour, assisted by a 17-year-old earning \$1.75 an hour (I was, after all, the boss) and we plunged in together. All in.

The set-up was this: Three sessions at two different parks on opposite ends of the city; Mounds Park on the East Side and Newell Park in the Midway. Each developmentally disabled “camper” would be paired with a teen volunteer “counselor.” SPARC would handle all the recruitment and provide me with the necessary background data on each camper. All activities would be planned and overseen by me and my able assistant, Dickie, a 17-year-old whose main qualifications were a great personality and his own means of transportation to the job sites.

Shortly before camp was scheduled to begin, the city provided a one-day in-service training for counselors at Newell Park. A team of highly experienced leaders from the Rec Department staff demonstrated a wide variety of traditional day camp activities. Everything from arts and crafts to nature hikes to calisthenics, which we would definitely use, to making a lanyard (maybe) to building a fire (never). We got to know each other and our shared mission: our campers and their needs came first.

We met each day from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. Session one spanned two weeks at Mounds Park, followed by another two-week session at Mounds, and ending in a three-week session at Newell. Campers could come to any or all sessions, and many attended all three. My best guess is that we served 20 to 25 campers each session and were fortunate to have an equal number of teen volunteers. Many of our campers were children with developmental delays due to Down’s Syndrome, seizure disorders, and hearing and/or vision impairments. Some were on the autism spectrum. All were ambulatory but several campers wore leg braces, and one boy wore a very restrictive hip-to-neck back brace. I am happy to say this never stopped him from participating in any activity. Most attended Special Education classes in the public schools but



were not mainstreamed. Nearly all of the adult campers who joined us at session two came from two residential homes in St. Paul, Nor-Haven for women and Greenbrier for men.⁵ This new model of community-based housing drew residents from the overcrowded state hospitals.

For so many kids with special needs, summer was a lonely time. Without school, too many simply sat at home without friends or things to do. Lacking mental and physical stimulation, their hard-won skills began to regress. But the real tragedy was this: they had no fun. The opportunity for a summer camp just for them was welcomed wholeheartedly. On the very first day, dozens of campers showed up at Mounds Park, along with enough teen volunteers to pair up one to one. Our charge was simple: make sure the campers have a great time without incurring any injuries more serious than a bruise.

Here are some of the things we did not have: for four weeks, no indoor facility; no shelter from rain; almost no experience; no medical training; no telephone; no on-site storage (we used Mounds Park Hospital to store equipment). At Newell Park we had a building and a telephone, and a little more experience. This project could so easily have failed. But we had no time to give failure a thought. We all, and I mean *all*, just dove in with our hands and feet and open hearts.

To our surprise and joy, the greater community embraced us and offered whatever they

could. Free bowling at Hafner's Bowl, compliments of the owner, Don. A tour of Hamm's Brewery including a visit from the Hamm's Bear who happened to be a friend of mine from Schweitz's. (This was his summer job.) Watermelon on hot days, provided by one of the local fruit and produce companies, I never knew which one, whose owner was a friend of the bus driver from the Nor-Haven home. A lovely day at Como Park including free rides. In subsequent summers, live music for sing-alongs and dancing with wonderful local entertainer, Bob Pine.⁶ And lots of encouraging words. The families of the campers, and the staff members of the institutions whose residents we served helped us out in a million ways, including opening their common rooms to us on rainy days. Our many teen volunteers, one assigned to each camper, came faithfully every day, and brought enthusiasm and genuine friendship and acceptance to every single camper.

Two federally funded employment programs placed workers with us. One, a group of students from St. Paul Public Schools, and the other, three young women from the Ramsey County Welfare Department. They too became part of our large and loving family. The recreation department field supervisors believed in us and got behind us 100 percent, making sure we had playground equipment, art supplies, and eventually, free lunches. They sang our praises loud and long. A letter to the editor in one of the

Campers building sandcastles at Newell Park, and climbing on the backs and shoulders of strong, patient teen counselors. The author recalls carrying lots of campers all around the parks. *Courtesy Rebecca Sanchelli Sandsmo.*

St. Paul newspapers prompted a call from Councilman Victor Tedesco, then in charge of Parks and Rec, to let me know that he would help in any way he could. A local television station did a story for the evening news. This project just might succeed!

Our Day Camp Family

All things worked together in our favor, but it would have come to nothing without the sweetness and trust of our wonderful campers. For the first two weeks all of our campers were children, lots of them from family homes and foster homes. Children who came eager and ready to play, to sing, to laugh, to try new things, and to love without embarrassment.

At three weeks, adults were added to the mix. Many of these men and women had lived most of their lives in state institutions whose very names, perhaps unfairly, had become synonymous with neglect, despair, and darkness. When these hospitals closed, the residents were moved into newer, dormitory style facilities. Here, a small and compassionate staff gently assisted these often-neglected souls into reintegration with the greater community. Day camp was a first step for some. Many had physical conditions that had never been treated. Their

appearance could be shocking, and I pray we were able to cover our initial reaction because in no time at all we no longer saw the shells, but only the beauty of the pearls within. Fun, adventurous, joyous, and loving. The world was new and bright to those who had lived so long in darkness.

A Day at Camp

We packed a lot of activity into those summer days, and we had very large areas to explore. Though we all wore name tags, and campers were always accompanied by a counselor, I worried that someone could wander off. If they needed help, could they tell someone? So in the interest of safety, we started each day with the "Name Address and Phone Number Club." Campers who could recite this information earned a big yellow star which would be added to our large announcement board amid thunderous applause. By the end of each session, all names were accounted for and thankfully, no one ever got lost.

Then it was on to the field. Soccer games with only one rule: don't touch the ball with your hands. One of our campers, Bobby, was an avid sports enthusiast and a walking encyclopedia of sports statistics. During our morning games he would run up and down the field carrying a large stick with a can attached to the end (microphone and boom, day-camp style) calling our soccer games with exciting sports lingo. Duck Duck Gray Duck with one unwritten rule: the camper, no matter how slow, always outruns the volunteer. Red Rover: same. Hiking all over the parks, encouraging tired, out-of-shape campers to keep on trekking, carrying them on our backs at times. Lovely, indescribable art works of every variety displayed with pride, wherever. Lunch provided by the city and always a surprise, gobbled down with gusto by people who expended a lot of energy each morning. And at the end of the day, all of us sitting together under a shady tree, singing silly old camp songs, falling onto each other with laughter, waiting for pickup by the most grateful parents. For the adults, happy chatter on a restful bus ride home.

One of our campers, Jeff, lived with his grandmother near the old Rondo neighborhood. Jeff was 10 years old, a sweet and shy boy, the light of his grandmother's life. She had no way of

Camper Jeff and teen counselor sharing a hug in front of the building at Newell Park, which is still there today. Love flowed freely at day camp. *Courtesy Rebecca Sanchelli Sandsmo.*



getting him to and from day camp, so arrangements were made for him to arrive by taxi, then ride home with me and a car full of teen volunteers in my rattle trap car. His grandmother, I know, had spent her day missing him, watching for him. She was waiting at the door each day when we pulled up. As we helped Jeff out of the car, she would smile and open her arms. Jeff would run into them, enfolded into the safe and loving world that was the two of them together. After a long embrace, she would remember us, turn Jeff around, and remind him to thank us. And he, a child who said almost nothing, turned around, raised his hand to the side of his face, and with a little wave of his fingers, said softly, "Bye, tomata."

Looking Back

We did our job that summer, and the next two for me. We earned our pay. We gave our campers a summer full of memories. The City of St. Paul's commitment to adaptive recreation grew and continues to this day.⁷ But what we got in return was immeasurable, and hard to describe in mere words. The love and trust placed in us by the most vulnerable people changed our lives forever, every one of us. They brought out our best selves, the people we were when no one judged us on the frills. All that mattered was

who was good, who was helpful, who was loving, and above all, who could share joy. Young and younger, there was no one "old" at camp, we all learned that what we do matters, and it mattered that we lived.

And now, whenever I hear "Kumbaya," I hear Gwen singing it out loud and proud, every word mispronounced. Whenever I see kids playing a game on the playground, I think of Jeannie, thrilled to be the Gray Duck, flapping her arms and tearing around the circle in pure joy, her pursuer trying mightily to be outrun so that Jeannie could plop down safely on someone's lap with a big hug. Whenever I see a man on a mission, I think of Joey, whose mission it was to beautify Newell Park by painting every big rock a different bright color.

And whenever I hear Karen Carpenter sing, I see all of us campers, teens, and two paid employees sitting under a tree, exhausted by a full day of running and laughing and sharing. Singing along together to that summer's big hit played on a six-transistor radio. "Just like me, they long to be, close to you."

Postscript

A short while ago, maybe fifty summers after my first day camp experience, I visited the St. Paul Parks and Recreation Department Adaptive

That's Peggy O'Neil

Most of our adult day-campers came to us from two residential homes that were created as an alternative to the overcrowded state hospitals. But a few of the adults did come from their family homes. One of these was a man of about 40 years old named Gareth. A stocky, good-natured man and a perfect gentleman who was a natural fit for the activities and camaraderie of day camp, in spite of cognitive and physical challenges.

Like all the rest of us, he loved music, and especially singing. But unlike the rest of us, he had a marvelous voice. A big, booming baritone that rumbled up from his big frame. He especially loved old-timey songs and polka music and generously taught us a few songs. Our favorite was "That's Peggy O'Neil," done as a call-and-response with Gareth in the lead.

Gareth: If her eyes are as blue as the sky,

Us: That's Peggy O'Neil.

Gareth: If she's smiling all the while,

Us: That's Peggy O'Neil.

Gareth: If she looks like a sly little rogue,
If she talks with a cute little brogue
Sweet personality full of rascality,

Us: (*fortissimo*): THAT'S PEGGY O'NEIL!

While our enthusiasm was commendable, it could not compensate for the complete lack of musicality. Too many clashing versions of the tune. We were, to put it plainly, just awful. It must have been painful for Gareth to hear his favorite music sung so badly. More than once, I saw him begin to lift his hands to cover his ears but he always stopped short, far too polite to risk hurting our feelings when we were having so much fun. A good man, with a fine voice, and a great big heart.



A Certificate of Appreciation was given to the author's sister, Becky. Counselors worked from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. every day for two or three-week periods. Their tremendous dedication made the summer fun for so many campers whose joy and gratitude were the true rewards for the counselors.

Photos courtesy Rebecca Sanchelli Sandsmo.

Recreation office. It was large, well-equipped, and staffed by enthusiastic and capable workers busy with lots of programs for everyone. Year-round programming began in 1976 and continues to this day offering a wide range of activities to all individuals. On every wall there are pictures of happy, active, engaged people. If success is measured in smiles, this program has—then and now—met its goal, and then some.

SPARC is now called The Arc,⁸ and represents all the regional offices in Minnesota with the exception of the Iron Range. They have moved from their small office in downtown St. Paul into a large new facility in the Midway. In

reading their annual reports over many years, I found that day camp was an idea that they had been trying to get up and running for a very long time, with the backing of many prominent Minnesotans, including Luther Youngdahl, Governor of Minnesota from 1947 to 1951, and his brother Reuben K. Youngdahl, pastor of Mount Olivet Lutheran Church for thirty years.⁹ Their belief in the right of everyone to live a fulfilling life, their persistence, and their collaboration with the City of St. Paul made today's Adaptive Recreation a reality. I like to think that those first summers of day camp were a good start.

Acknowledgments

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Nancy Sanchelli Guertin worked for the City of St. Paul for thirty years, primarily at the St. Paul Public Library. She has also worked as a school librarian and a musician. Now retired, she collects and presents stories set in St. Paul's Swede Hollow.

NOTES

1. Judy Collins, "Both Sides Now." *Wildflowers*. Elektra Records, 1967.
2. The Carpenters, "(They Long to Be) Close to You." *Close to You*. A&M Records, 1970.
3. Gerald W. Prill was employed by the St. Paul Department of Parks and Recreation for thirty-five years, fifteen of those years as Superintendent of Recreation Programs. Gerald W. Prill obituary, *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, January 3, 2013.
4. Annual Report, City of St. Paul Bureau of Parks and Recreation, 1968, ARC Minnesota Records, Minnesota Historical Society.
5. In 1970 there were three residential homes for developmentally disabled adults in St. Paul: the Nor-Haven Home for women; Greenbrier Home for

men; and Reaney Heights which served both men and women.

6. Bob Pine obituary, *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, July 27, 2002.

7. Year-round programming for adaptive recreation through the St. Paul Department of Parks and Recreation began in 1976 and continues to this day.

8. "History of The Arc in Minnesota," The Arc Minnesota website, updated 2025, <https://arcminnesota.org/about/why-the-arc/history-of-the-arc-in-minnesota>.

9. "Highlight of Convention," in the notes from the National Association for Retarded Children (NARC) Convention held in Minneapolis circa 1960, ARC Minnesota Records, Minnesota Historical Society.