On March 13, 2020, we moved our family from northern New Jersey to our summer camp in Maine. Quarantine for us (like the rest of the world) was riddled with stress, anxiety, and sleepless nights. We tried to remain hopeful that we would be able to open camp for the children. We were diligent in the decision-making process and committed to the mission. As passionate about campers as we are, there were several times when our optimism seemed fleeting. We had a long wait for the green light and the protocols from the CDC.

The news reports were grim. We continually heard about school closures and event cancellations. The death toll from COVID-19 was ticking across the screen. It was very scary to imagine a summer without camp. We had to give hope to campers, as so many camps around the country were closing. We held several Zoom meetings with other camp directors, staff members, campers, and their parents. We had virtual campfires and trivia contests. They were informative and at times fun, but we needed to find a way to have real, in-person camp. The summer camp season was now filled with uncertainty.

Pins And Needles

We spent the cold Maine months devising different plans, figuring out how to implement social distancing, how to properly sanitize, and how to conduct testing. We wanted to give campers an opportunity to bring some normalcy to their lives. We’ve always felt kids needed camp, but now, more than ever, they really needed camp! We found ourselves in a position we had never been before. Camper and staff recruitment came to a screeching halt. Parents had many inquiries, but we had no answers for them. Some parents pulled their children’s registration and demanded refunds. Others asked us to roll over their registration to 2021, with hopes of a vaccine by next summer. Many parents were petrified to let their children come to camp. As many camps in the Northeast closed, our faith in the process became questionable.

As we were approaching the month of May, information
was unfolding. We sat as a team and waited each week to hear what Janet Mills, the governor of Maine, would say about how new guidelines would affect our plans. Once she gave camps the all-clear, based on her research and the Maine CDC Guidelines, we made the bold decision to go for it! There was a lot of work to do. We had many international staff members who were not getting visas. We had no idea if we would be able to get any real testing. We had to replace the nurses, chefs, and other staff members who couldn’t return. To maintain our bubble, we could not hire local staff for day work. We had to hire over 50 new staff members within two weeks! We did get lucky because we were flooded with applicants from camps that were unable to open. Throughout all of the obstacles and doubt, we maintained the notion that we needed to open for the children. They had been isolated from any social interaction and connected to screens for three months.

**Digging In**

Thankfully, earlier in the year, the American Camp Association and the YMCA released a 90-page field guide that advised day and overnight camps on how to implement public-health guidelines from the CDC. We incorporated that, as well as the Maine CDC guidelines and parameters into creating our own Camp Wekeela COVID-19 Response Plan. We revised the Parent/Camper Handbook and Staff Resource Manual to reflect the changes, and we updated camp policies to ensure they would be completely compliant and relevant. From head lice to strep throat, summer camps have always had to deal with contagious diseases. As challenging as the 2009 season was due to H1N1 (Swine Flu), no summer in recent memory posed a bigger challenge than the summer of 2020.

The spring was an emotional roller coaster, but we finally decided to announce a five-week session. There were two different schools of thought: some families were absolutely thrilled we were opening, and some thought it was a terrible idea. Regardless of any pushback, we were inspired by the healthcare workers who are on the front lines every day. They inspired us to do the challenging work (and planning) to support the camp community and the children.

Tom Rosenberg, president and CEO of the American Camp Association, said that, of the more than 15,000 camps in the U.S., 80 percent of overnight camps and 40 percent of day camps had shuttered, and the industry faces a revenue loss of $16 billion (National Geographic, July 31, 2020). It was heartbreaking for children who were so looking forward to returning to their happy places, and for our colleagues who worked all year preparing for camp.

**Creating Cohorts**

Staff training had a different look as we conducted Zoom calls well in advance of the campers’ arrival. Like the campers, we had American staff members who decided to remain at home for the summer because of the unknowns. The staff members who had been hired had to commit to a camp bubble, where they would not be able to leave
once arriving at camp. They would not be able to go to the store or have days off outside of camp. That is pure commitment! When returning staff members arrived, many of whom had been former campers that we’ve known since their youth, we were unable to hug them hello. We all wore face coverings, which seemed like the antithesis of camp. The Maine CDC required a mandatory, two-week quarantine period, so we used that time for training. Every staff member needed to arrive at camp with a recent negative COVID test result and to quarantine on their own; then, after a few days, we tested everyone at camp with a rapid test. Testing is crucial to the success of running a successful program. Maine required us to obtain a certified lab license. A tremendous amount of effort went into all the planning for testing.

Staff members were placed into cohorts when they arrived at camp. Cohorting is a grouping strategy used to help reduce the risk of disease transmission by creating smaller groups from a larger group. In July 2020, Maine guidelines allowed cohorts of 50 people. We made sure the cohorts ate all meals together, worked together, and slept in the cabins together. The reason for cohorting is for contact tracing and the prevention of widespread infection. If someone were to contract COVID-19, we would be able to isolate and track immediately.

We decided to have one start date for camp. All campers were quarantined at home prior to arrival, were tested at home, and needed to send proof of a negative result. The campers’ families were to fill out a symptom tracker that was then loaded to our database so we could track their health during quarantine. Campers were screened with temperature and symptom checks before getting on any form of transportation. The campers were then screened again at an off-site location before being cleared to continue to the campsite. Once children arrived, they were cohorted with their counselors; all of us wore masks, and activities were household-focused. When the entire camp interacted, we adhered to the social-distancing policies. We again tested all staff members and campers a few days after arrival. Once the quarantine was finished and it was determined that camp had met the guidelines for relaxing cohort protocols, we moved back to more regular programming with specialized instruction and safe interaction.

**When The Masks Came Off**

The success of running a summer camp during a pandemic depends solely on maintaining a “bubble.” Once we got to the point where everyone was safe and we no longer needed to wear masks, we finally felt like we were “home.” The anxieties of all members of the community lifted, and kids felt more like kids. We certainly had guidance and policies, but, most importantly, we had a COVID-19 testing apparatus and testing kits. Staff members spent a total of seven weeks and five total weeks in a safe bubble in the state of Maine—one of the states with the lowest number of cases and fatalities since the pandemic began.

One of the challenges in opening camp this past summer was trying to create the sense of camaraderie that is camp as we know it. We often worried about having campfires or water skiing. After all, camp is the complete opposite of social distancing. Campers hug their friends, sing at the top of their lungs at meal times, and walk hand-in-hand to activities. What would the new normal feel like? It has been said that “camp people” are special people. The camaraderie that exists at camp continued regardless of any restrictions brought on by COVID-19. We wore masks, but we never lost our voices. After four months of self-isolation and a lack of socialization, campers were more grateful for the things they had missed for so long.

This pandemic has forced children away from their classrooms and onto online learning. We became very aware of kids’ stress levels and lack of socialization. As educators and camp professionals for more than 30 years, we were literally brought to tears some days watching the campers and counselors interacting and socializing on the beautiful Wekeela campus. People need a human connection, especially children. Best of all, the connections this summer...
and every summer are real, not on screens. We had good, old-fashioned, quality face time with real eye contact and genuine friendships.

To keep our “bubble” intact, parents were not permitted to drop off their child(ren) or pick them up at camp. These stipulations presented challenges and forced us to think out of the box, which camp directors do so well. We did not have any field trips, overnight trips, inter-camp games, or teen multi-day trips. But campers and their parents knew this in advance. The campers were happy to be at camp, and the usual extras were not missed. Staff members were committed to spending their nights off and days off at camp. We created special staff-only areas. We really missed the annual Visiting Day when parents in a long line of cars come to see their children, shouting and waving, who welcome their families to their summer home.

We can all agree that summertime goes way too fast. Our favorite artist, John Mayer, sings in his song “Wildfire,” “Cause a little bit of summer’s what the whole year is all about.” It’s a perfect image for what we do as camp directors. We never back down from a challenge. Kids needed camp, and we opened ours.

Looking Back While Moving Forward

Reflecting on the summer 2020 season, we noticed the indirect toll that coronavirus was taking on kids. Months of isolation and social distancing have left some kids socially and physically out of shape. We have concerns about the children who have anxiety as a result of the pandemic. Hopefully, the time spent at camp helped.

As we write this, the COVID-19 pandemic is still ominous and real. Many students will have delayed school openings and will continue their learning virtually. Many of our staff members are not returning to their college campuses. Quarantines will lead to more social isolation. Children and their parents will need to rely heavily on technology. We are concerned about the mental health of children, adolescents, and college students. We are concerned about parents and their own emotional health. We all need to get sleep, exercise, eat well, contribute to society and make a difference, show people kindness, and have structure. In other words, bring the ethos of summer camp into our homes.

The American Camp Association plans to conduct a retrospective survey of camps later this year. Some experts are documenting these camp lessons so schools can learn from them and adopt best practices. The stakes are too high for the nation to get this wrong.

The summer of 2020 was a challenge like no other, and thanks to incredible and dedicated staff members, we rose to the occasion to make it happen. The reward has far outweighed the risks.

We are grateful to camper parents who had the confidence and supported us in our efforts to open. Their children were resilient and amazing. They reunited with friends, formed new relationships, and enjoyed Little Bear Pond like never before. Summer camp has provided children opportunities for foundational social and emotional development, such as independent decision-making and self-reliance, appreciation for the great outdoors, and principled participation in a special community. The counselors had a substantial job that provided an incredible opportunity to display real responsibility in paving the road to a productive adulthood. For this season, (aka COVID-19 summer), all our staff wore capes. They were superheroes!!

In 2020, our community didn’t take for granted any time at camp. The children enjoyed every minute of the summer-camp experience more than ever. Campers were able to explore who they were, learn new things, work on their social interactions, and build self-confidence, self-worth, and self-esteem. After four months of being quarantined, children had a critical opportunity to foster their independence. We thank the parents, their children, and our staff members for taking the risks, for believing in our family, and for allowing us to provide campers with much-needed normalcy in these uncertain times.

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