

Some enchanted summer ...

Many a marriage has started with an encounter at camp

by Sarah Singer

Special to WJW

Forget camp memories of songfests, summertime Shabbat and Israeli dancing around the campfire. University City, Md., resident Bob Saks remembers Camp Ramah as a place “where Cupid first found [him].” It was at Ramah in New England that Saks met his wife, then Loretta Vitale. For many counselors (and campers) at Jewish camps, campfires ignite more than Jewish spirit. They spark marriages as well.

Though Saks was a student at the Jewish Theological Seminary, he spent summers in the kitchen, a more lucrative position than counselor or teacher. It was just the right place to meet a girl who craved crumb cake. Saks remembers Vitale as one of a gaggle of campers who came knocking at the kitchen door foraging for leftovers. They chatted together, but nothing more.

Fast-forward two summers when Vitale returned to camp as a counselor of 13-year-old girls after spending a summer as a counselor in training at a different Ramah facility. The couple remembered each other from the “crumb cake days.”

“This time there was a different tone [to the relationship],” explains

Saks. After his new sweetheart would put her bunk to bed and he would finish his kitchen duties, they’d stroll off campus to Rhonda’s, a dairy bar nestled on a small beach, where they spent hours talking together.

The two married about two weeks after Saks finished seminary studies. After years as director of the

University of Maryland’s Hillel, Saks now serves as rabbi of Bet Mishpacha in the District and associate rabbi at Columbia Jewish Congregation. Loretta Saks is director of field education at the National Catholic School of Social Service.

Cupid must have been busy at Camp Ramah when Donna Neumark, then 14, and her husband

David, then 15, spent the summer at Camp Tavor, the Habonim-sponsored camp in Three Rivers, Mich.

“We absolutely weren’t friends,” Donna Neumark explains. Nor did they become friends when they “graduated” from campers to counselors. They were too different.

“I was the responsible one,” she says. “He conducted raids. We absolutely weren’t attracted to each other.”

Jewish camp couldn’t bring these two together, but Israel could. While they were in Israel attending the yearlong Habonim Workshop, “we were sitting next to each other milking cows and I started flirting,” Neumark says. “The rest is history.” The “rest” was spending the balance of the year in Israel, a post-Israel summer together as Tavor counselors, and trips between Milwaukee (her home) and Chicago (his) during the off seasons.

The couple married shortly after she graduated from college with nearly 40 to 50 people from their Habonim network at the wedding. After a stint in Rockville, among other places, the Neumarks settled in San Francisco where he works as an economics professor at University of California, Irvine, and she as a geriatric care manager.

It was 1991 when Lauren Gross laid eyes on Noah Gallagher. It was love at first sight. Or what passes for love when you’re 11 years old at Camp Young Judaea Midwest.

“I had the biggest crush on him,” says Gross. “He was the cutest boy at camp. All the little girls had crushes on him.” But Gross knew she flew way below the radar of this “older man.” And, at 14, Gallagher was too busy with friends his own age to notice her.

She finally registered on his radar when they attended Tel Yehudah, the senior leadership camp in 1997, but the difference between his status as a counselor and hers as a camper was a great divide.

By the time they met again in 2005 at a conference for the Union for Reform Judaism, the age difference didn’t matter.

“He was working for the Zionist branch of the Reform Jewish movement and I was working in Jewish genetic diseases,” Gross says.

Both had come to conference to staff booths. On the day before the conference started, Gross spotted Gallagher talking on his cell phone. The sight of him brought back the sweet memories of innocent crushes.

When Gallagher made it over to her booth, their reunion led to lunch.

“It took some time to realize that he was flirting with me,” says Gross,



So many romances have begun at the Ramah camp in the Poconos that the camp has a gazebo *zugot*, a couples gazebo, filling with plaques commemorating the marriages of couples who have met at the mountain retreat.

Photos courtesy of the Seltzer family

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Stacy, in yellow, and Matthew, in blue at the center of the photo, at the dedication of their plaque in the gazebo *zugot*, couples gazebo, marking another Ramah marriage.

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who still viewed Gallagher with the heart of an 11-year-old. Yet, what had seemed like an impossible leap in age and status had shrunk to a small step now that she was 25 and he was 28.

The relationship that began at the conference continued through graduate school and the couple plans to marry in January. Their bridal party contains plenty of camp contacts.

"I met lots of people at camp," says Gross, "but I can't believe that one of those people would be someone I married."

Mitchell Cohen can. As director of the National Ramah Commission, he had always heard stories of couples who met at camp. In 2005, he directed staff to codify these stories and the Ramah Marriage Web site was born.

It provided real evidence that "camp is a great place to meet and fall in love," says Nancy Scheff, communications director for the National Ramah Commission. Couples who've met through the Ramah movement can "register" their marriages and post their stories. The searchable database is organized by camper name or by camp.

"We have about 300 couples registered on the site, but we believe there are hundreds more people in a Ramah marriage," says Scheff.

Three camps go beyond the virtual to celebrate Ramah marriages. The dining room at Ramah in the

Berkshires has a *shidduchim* wall filled with the names of couples who met there. The Ramah in Wisconsin maintains a B'shert Fund, and the Ramah in the Poconos has a gazebo *zugot*, a couples gazebo, rapidly filling with plaques commemorating couples who met at this mountain retreat.

One more plaque was added to the gazebo this summer when Boston-based Stacy and Matthew Seltzer celebrated their Ramah marriage. The couple met when they were 18-year-olds.

She had graduated from camper to counselor and was working as a junior counselor assigned to a bunk of rising eighth-graders. He was spending his second summer as a senior counselor for rising seventh-grade boys. They remember meeting at staff week after Shabbat dinner.

Though the couple spent the summer making morning runs, coordinating days off, and simply hanging out, they made a decision to limit their relationship to the camp season. They decided that they'd return to their respective colleges unencumbered.

Three weeks later, they found themselves on the phone every evening and knew this was more than a summer romance. The couple was married in August 2007 with about 20 Ramahniks as witnesses.

When Scheff surfs the site, "I see the common themes of spiritual growth and finding common values. It's what makes Ramah so special," she says.

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