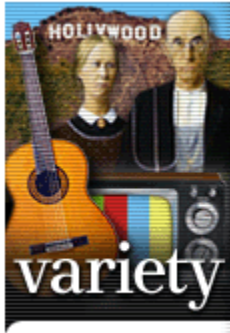


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Odayin: A Minnesota camp with a heart

Robert Franklin, Star Tribune

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CROSSLAKE, MINN. -- Ten-year-old Donovan Bays says a big attraction at camp this summer was "being able to swim without my shirt."

That's because he wasn't self-conscious about his heart surgery scars. Nearly all the kids at Camp Odayin -- and several of the counselors -- have them.

Odayin is billed as the only camp in the Midwest for children with heart disease, children who may be the only heart patients in their schools, those who often didn't go to other camps because of embarrassment or because the camps couldn't ensure their care.

At Odayin, "it's good to know you're not the only one who has this disease," said Matthew Mangen, 10.

The camp, in its second year, is unusual in other ways: It charges only a \$25 per camper registration fee. Staff members are volunteers, some from Minnesota's best-known hospitals.

And it's a camp within a camp, running for two weeks in Crosslake at Camp Knutson, a Lutheran-operated Whitefish Lake camp that was in danger of being closed and relocated five years ago.



Boys from Camp Odayin's Poplar Cabin

David Brewster
Star Tribune

Knutson, with 30 acres and a mile of shoreline donated by longtime Minnesota congressman Harold Knutson, will mark its 50th anniversary this weekend with every building new or refurbished through a \$3 million capital fund drive led by a Catholic couple.

Knutson has expanded its season from 10 to 13 weeks, with about 900 campers a year -- kids, and in some cases families, with skin diseases, autism, HIV, Down syndrome and other special needs.

Like the other sessions, the object of Odayin, which means "heart" in Ojibway, is "to make it a run-of-the-mill summer camp," said Sara Sanders, Odayin's

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Sara Sanders, Camp Odayin founder and president

David Brewster
Star Tribune

founder. "We don't want these kids to feel like heart patients."

And, much of the time, they don't. "They're just like any other kid," said Dr. Mike Earing, a Mayo Clinic physician who volunteers at the camp. "They only have one kid speed."

Throughout the two weeks, kids get caught up in swimming, boating, horseback riding, biking, archery, crafts and other camp stuff -- goofy songs, scoping out the opposite sex, a backwards day that has dinner in the morning and breakfast at night.

Odayin volunteers include two doctors and as many as seven nurses each week. Nurses attend every activity, dole out medicine and staff an infirmary that they describe as equal to a mini-intensive care unit (two children were treated this year for heart-related problems).



Donovan Bays and Matthew Mangen

David Brewster
Star Tribune

The campers have "an amazingly broad spectrum" of medical conditions, said Dr. Charlie Baker, a volunteer who is a Minneapolis Children's Heart Clinic cardiologist.

Several, including Lizzie Lee, 9, of Pillager, Minn., have had heart transplants. Others live with congenital defects, artificial valves or abnormal heart rhythms.



Dennis Latter gets archery pointers.

David Brewster
Star Tribune

Donovan, who's from Frederick, Md., and Matthew, from Plymouth, said they've had three and four surgeries respectively. "There's lots of people who have heart surgeries in the world, but they're really spread out and you don't know any of them," Matthew said.

Now he does, of course, and some of them are Odayin's volunteer counselors.

Paul Kohl of Crosslake, a counselor who had a heart transplant four years ago, said the camp "is one of the highlights of my summer." Aimee Conant, 23, of Battle Creek, Mich., who had surgery to correct transposition of the great vessels, said, "I wish they had a camp like this when I was growing up."

'You had the same?'

Sanders, 33, is married and has a 15-month-old daughter. She wears an implanted defibrillator. Campers sometimes look at healthy, active

counselors such as herself and say, "You had the same surgery I did?"

She knew about heart function as a child. Her father, John Meslow, worked for 30 years for Medtronic, and "I grew up taking pacemakers to show and tell." At age 13, she learned that she had supra ventricular tachycardia, in which abnormal electrical impulses sometimes caused her heart to beat wildly.

In 2000, she received a Medtronic defibrillator -- a month too late for an employee discount because her father had just retired.

Sanders had been an elementary school social worker in Forest Lake. She volunteered for three summers at a camp for young heart patients in California. Then her mother, Karen, suggested she start one in Minnesota.

With funding help, notably from Medtronic, she organized the nonprofit Camp Odayin, raised money, recruited volunteers, developed programs and sought campers through cardiologists, school nurses and parent support groups.

The fee is kept to \$25 because families "usually are financially encumbered with a lot of bills," she said. "We wanted something associated with children's heart disease that doesn't have dollar signs after it." That means lots of fundraisers, including a fun run and walk to be held Sept. 6 in St. Paul.

Sanders chose Knutson from among 12 camps because of its gradual path to the beach, its proximity to a medical facility (St. Joseph's Hospital in Brainerd) and because the camp's mission to help special-needs kids meshes well with her own goals. Knutson's response was "above and beyond anything we received at the other camps," she said.

The number of campers doubled to 107 this year, and the camp has expanded from one week to two, for ages 8 to 11 and 12 to 16. Sanders said she'd like to start a Twin Cities day camp for younger children and bring past Odayin campers into leadership roles.

32 years in Congress

Knutson, on a point between Whitefish and Trout lakes, was the summer home of Harold Knutson, who immigrated from Norway as a child, rose from a 50-cent-a-week newspaper job to owner of papers in Wadena and Royalton.

He was elected to Congress in 1916 and served 32 years.

He gave his summer property to the old Evangelical Lutheran Church in 1953 to serve disadvantaged children.

The present-day owner, Lutheran Social Service, considered selling it about five years ago and using the money to build more modern facilities elsewhere. But Whitefish area neighbors didn't want it to leave and an appraisal suggested a sale wouldn't have raised the anticipated \$5 million to \$12 million.

Meanwhile, Jerry and Sandra Bilski, longtime summer neighbors, agreed to head a drive that has raised nearly \$3 million, including \$500,000 worth of labor from county prisoners. The result: nine refurbished buildings and eight new ones, including staff and camper housing and clinic-camp office building.

The camp will celebrate its 50th anniversary Saturday with tours starting at 1 p.m. and a rededication at 3 p.m.

The camp also will announce a fund drive for an endowment. The camp charges an average of \$25,000 for each of the specialized camps that use its facilities, director Rob Larson said, but fees cover only about 70 percent of its \$400,000 annual budget. Contributions and fundraisers such as a quilt auction make up most of the rest.

A staff of about 20 runs the food service, waterfront, horseback riding and other activities, and supplements cabin staff that other groups bring with them.

It's "the best summer job I've ever had," said Amber Rathmann of Waseca, Minn., an elementary education student at Gustavus Adolphus College in St. Peter. "They really care about who's here. It's all for the kids."

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