



For the love of nature

This summer camp is turning out a new generation of environmental stewards

On a summer day, stop by the shores of Clear Lake, a short drive from Peterborough, Ontario, and instead of the beeps and dings of phones you will be greeted by shrieks and laughter. Kids race in kayaks, scoop up water in search of frogs, and make friendship bracelets. When evening comes, they gather around lit candles and sing to the strum of a guitar.

With about 200 acres of land punctuated by forests, wetlands, and waterfront, Camp Kawartha, 30 kilometres north of Peterborough, entralls children and adults alike.

But it's more than just a beautiful place for kids to spend summers away from screens or a collection of programs that

only encourages children to learn outdoors. An even loftier mission is at the heart of Camp Kawartha: to teach young people the importance of caring for the land they live on and foster a new generation of environmental stewards.

It's an important assignment for a place that has deep roots with the Rotary Club of Peterborough, which founded what was to become Camp Kawartha in 1921. With the support of dedicated Rotarians over multiple generations, the camp today serves approximately 16,000 people annually at two locations and through outreach programs.

"We know that kids are increasingly more concerned about climate change, because they're the ones that are going to

inherit the mess from the generations in front of them," says Peterborough Rotarian Bruce Gravel. "The kids get a strong education while they're staying there of how important the environment is, how important clean air and water are, and how to minimize your footprint."

Of course, that's the camp's modern-day mission. It was founded more than a century ago as the Rotary Boys' Camp. Its aim then was to get underprivileged boys out of the city and spending time in nature, says Gravel, who worked with his wife, Frances, on a book about the history of the Peterborough club for its centennial. With urging from Claude Rogers, a charter member of the club, Rotarians acquired an initial 10 acres on the shore of Clear Lake



Founded in 1921, the Rotary Boys' Camp — now open to everyone and known as Camp Kawartha — was created by Claude Rogers and other Rotarians to get kids out of the city and into a place where they could spend more time in nature.

PHOTOGRAPHS: COURTESY OF CAMP KAWARTHA

for a mere \$250 in 1921 and built the camp structures themselves. The first group of campers consisted of 40 boys.

In 1954, the Peterborough YMCA purchased the camp. But the camp hit financial hardships in the 1980s and faced the possibility of being sold to a developer. It may well have been if not for 10 Rotarians who pooled their money to purchase the camp, giving it a second act. It reopened officially as Camp Kawartha Inc. in 1985. "The Camp Kawartha that exists and thrives today is from that solid footing and those 10 Rotarians who made it happen," Gravel says.

After buying the camp, volunteers and local tradespeople fixed it up to welcome campers. "The sleeping cabins were not insulated, and there was no wiring in them," says John Cockburn, the last living member of the group of 10 Rotarians. "We didn't have a dock. We had very few canoes or kayaks." Cockburn, at 85 still a member of the Peterborough club, says that saving the camp was one of the highlights of his 60-plus years as a Rotarian.

Camp Kawartha became a nonprofit, and the Peterborough Rotary club re-

mained committed to supporting it. Today, the camp welcomes all children. "In the last 20 years, it's migrated to helping kids, business leaders, and NGO leaders get an appreciation for the planet we live on," says longtime Rotarian Jim Coyle, who has been involved with Camp Kawartha for years, volunteering on projects as well as fundraising.

In addition to the original location, Camp Kawartha has an Environment Centre, situated next to Trent University's Wildlife Sanctuary in Peterborough. Camp Kawartha programming is offered there year-round, catering to children and educators, with opportunities for corporate team building.

"Even if you have one connection to the land — you have one positive memory or you're able to identify one species of plant or animal — then all of a sudden your relationship is stronger," says teacher on supply Lauren Yandt. She has worked as a volunteer and on staff at the Environment Centre and says she has seen the impact of those experiences on the way she teaches. "You're not going to want to take care of something, or be an

advocate for something, that you don't have a connection with."

Proof that the camp's lessons are resonating with young people comes from the many campers who go on to study environmental issues when they're older, with a goal of pursuing conservation-related occupations. Molly McLean, who attended Camp Kawartha for several years, is one of them. She is studying environmental engineering at Dalhousie University in Halifax and says her time at the camp inspired her to do so.

"Spending the summer at Camp Kawartha in the environment, pretty disconnected, I realized that the environment was something that I cared about a lot," says McLean, who is serving as the camp's operations director this summer. For kids today, playing in the lake, learning the names of plants, or turning over rocks to see what lives underneath can be a welcome change. Without the distractions of technology, she says, "you're forced to explore and make connections with the people around you."

Several years ago, Camp Kawartha directed research to explore the idea of



Outdoor learning principles

Camp Kawartha worked with experts across North America to develop a guide to age-appropriate, hands-on environmental activities for children. The resulting publication, *Pathways to Stewardship & Kinship*, also outlines stewardship principles that are fundamental regardless of age or developmental stage. Below are just a few of them; find the rest, and the full guidebook, at pathwayproject.ca.

- **Respect for all things — human and nonhuman.**
- **Natural curiosity and discovery rather than inundating children with facts.**
- **Sense of place that creates a deep attachment to the outdoors.**
- **Gratitude for the gifts of the natural world.**
- **Mentorship to share interest and enthusiasm for the outdoors.**



Situated on Clear Lake, 30 kilometres north of Peterborough, Ontario, Camp Kawartha today fosters (as one longtime Rotarian puts it) “an appreciation for the planet we live on” among children, business leaders, and NGO leaders.

learning through outdoor exploration. Its purpose was to understand what childhood experiences make a person care about the environment as an adult, says Jacob Rodenburg, executive director of the camp. The resulting guide, *Pathways to Stewardship & Kinship*, suggests activities for every age, from catching insects to calculating your ecological footprint.

Camp Kawartha also partners with the Canadian Canoe Museum to offer an annual Adventure in Understanding program, a multiday canoe journey for First Nations and non-native 16- to 18-year-olds to travel Trent-Severn Waterway to learn about the land and its people. The program was developed by the Rotary Club of Peterborough Kawartha with the assistance of the Curve Lake First Nation Youth Committee.

The Peterborough Kawartha club, as well as the Rotary Club of Bridgenorth-Ennismore-Lakefield, have helped the Peterborough club support Camp Kawartha over the years, Gravel says. In addition to offering hands-on volunteering, Rotarians fundraise for the camp, and a portion of that money is used to offset registration costs for children from low-income households.

They have also helped fund major structural improvements to the camp, such as the large addition to the main dining hall in 2004 that used eco-friendly straw bale construction — one of the first buildings of its kind in Ontario, Gravel says.

The Peterborough club committed \$100,000 in honour of its centennial toward the building of a new health centre in 2021. That centre, which also uses straw bale construction, is designed to have a negative carbon footprint, absorbing the plant-warming gas instead of emitting it. “It produces more energy than it uses, just like a tree, and the architecture looks like it belongs on the land,” Rodenburg says. It is surrounded by features including pollinator and sensory gardens, “where both nature and people can thrive,” he says.

It’s likely that Claude Rogers couldn’t have imagined the Camp Kawartha of today or how local Rotarians would fight to keep it alive. But it’s also not often that any kind of organization sustains itself for more than 100 years, Coyle says. “I’m so proud that our Rotary club started it in 1921,” he says, “and that it still continues today.” — AMY HOAK

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