

Single-parent Christian family campers refuel at Camp Stella

By Emily Morrison

The last evening of Single-Parent Christian Family Camp at Camp Stella Maris on Conesus Lake, parents and children began drifting in for dinner "about sixish." Later, 7 p.m. liturgy began some 30 to 40 minutes after the dinner hour. If anyone was concerned about the lack of regimentation, you couldn't read it in their serene expressions.

"We're on 'ish' time here," explained camp director Angela Gallo of the Genesee Valley Office of Social Ministry, who, along with her Finger Lakes counterpart, Carl Ritz, runs the Diocesan Council for Separated, Divorced, Bereaved and Remarried Christians.

A diocesan event with an ecumenical spirit, the camp has rounded out the final week of summer every year since 1978. Free of everyday pressures and distractions, single-parent families from all over the state take advantage of the camp's flexible format to heal and renew themselves physically, spiritually and emotionally.

From August 24-30, 68 adults and 104 children spent a relaxing week attending morning group sessions and evening prayer services, as well as sharing family time — boating, walking, swimming, dancing and working on craft projects and "family pictures" that capture the essence of the single-parent-family experience. Many campers came back this year after one or more previous summers, yet approximately half of those who attended this year were new "recruits."

"We still have some adults who come back after their kids are grown," says Angie Gallo, who adds that most of the participants are parents and children who come to spend time with each other. Although most campers hail from various Catholic parishes, probably 15 of this season's participating families were from other Christian denominations.

Fifteen of the parents this year were fathers, while 16 teenagers returned this summer without their parents, to serve as teen camp counselors, working with younger children and taking responsibility for individual cabins.

"The camp started off as very unstructured the first year, but has turned into a tremendous growth program for families," observes Gallo, who coordinated the first family camp nine years ago and has done so ever since. Over the ensuing years, the program evolved steadily into a structured week of activities designed to help divided families derive the maximum possible benefit from the camp experience.

"We do nurturing, and cook for them," Gallo elaborates. "They don't have to watch the clock." A bell announces meals

support payments and financial limitations that seem to come with the territory.

Single-parent families often have a problem with finances," says JoAnne LiBerti, a member of Holy Spirit Parish in Buffalo. "This is the only place most of us can afford to go on vacation." Sandy Miller of Schenectady notes that campers generally pay \$85 for the week, unless financial hardship makes them eligible for a scholarship.

Like other programs administered by the Diocesan Council for the Separated, Divorced, Bereaved and Remarried, the camp is offered at a relatively low fee. "There's a strong awareness of the feminization of poverty," Gallo points out, in support of the contention that most women with custody of children are set back economically by divorce, often to a severe degree. "So we keep our programs at low cost. Most of the programs and workshops are run by peer volunteers," she adds. "It's definitely a peer ministry."

The ministry supports a range of crisis assistance and ongoing peer support groups, retreats, conferences and workshops, as well as such social and recreational programs such as Single-Parent Christian Family Camp and a Harvest Picnic, to be held this fall on September 20.

"The ministry in itself is very holistic," says Gallo. "It covers emotional stability, growth, spirituality, children and their needs." She estimates that it takes most people about a year to a year and a half to go through the series of workshops the council offers on the initial crisis, rebuilding and positive directions for the future.

Special small support groups address the concerns of particular constituencies among the umbrella of separation/divorce, bereavement issues. "We have a small group of people whose marriages broke up because of homosexuality, for instance," says Gallo. Other groups focus on alcoholism, widowhood or emotional problems.

A teen group offers peer support and crisis assistance for adolescents living in a changing family situation. Such support for children of divorce or bereavement is rare, according to campers from other dioceses within the state.

"There is a divorced/separated Catholics group in our parish, but only about three people come," says Jo Gioia. "There's no diocesan umbrella, and nothing for teens and children." Gioia notes a greater interest in supporting individual families through Catholic Charities in her parish, but feels attention drawn to divorced families through support groups would be unwelcome.

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**Angela Gallo, Director
Single-Parent Christian Family Camp**

and prayer services, she adds. Emotional needs are taken care of by experienced adult counselors who attempt to ease the stress frequently caused by living in a single-parent situation.

"It's an atmosphere of unconditional love," offers camper Josephine Gioia, a mother of two adolescent daughters. "Everything here is hugs." This summer, the family returned to camp for the third consecutive year from St. Aidan's Parish in Williston Park, Long Island.

A number of former campers return each year to volunteer their services, working with the younger children during morning sessions or lending their time and even equipment to current campers. "We were lucky this year," says Gallo. "One of the families who had been here another year came back with a boat. When people come to camp, it's like a fever. You want to come back when your life is straightened out and do something for somebody else."

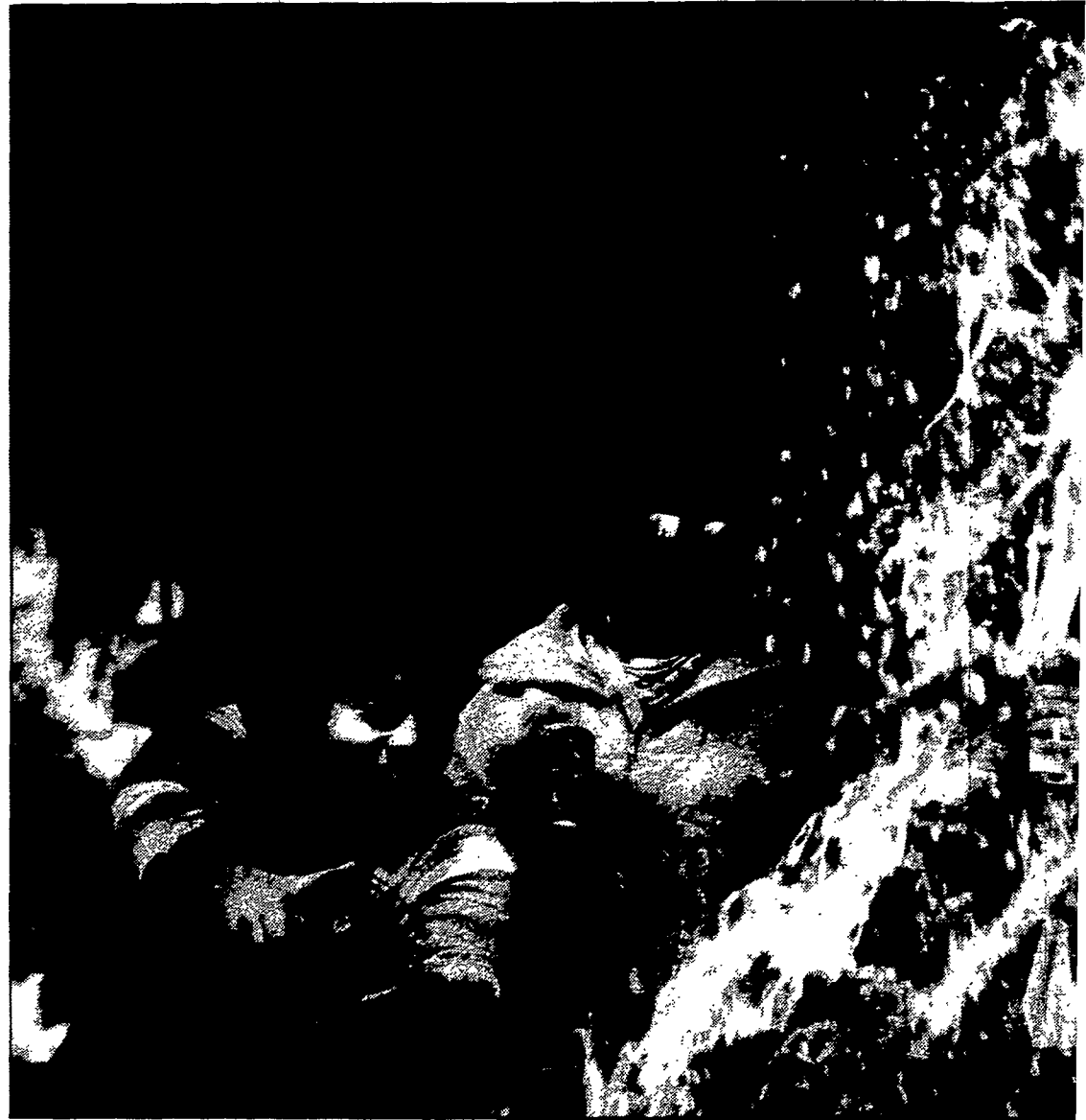
Camp activities include a children's hour at night, featuring reading and movies. Morning sessions often involve role-playing that centers on such single-parent family issues as breaking curfews, setting limits, parents' dating, visitation, defaulted child

The first year Gioia came to Camp Stella Maris, she brought her daughters against their wishes, but the girls soon overcame their anxiety. "Now, our one vacation a year is camp, and they don't want to go anywhere else. My older daughter saves her babysitting money."

Ruth Frawley of Vestal, N.Y., came to camp for the first time this summer with her 17-year-old daughter and 14-year-old son, after attending the 11th annual regional Conference for the Separated, Divorced, Widowed and Remarried in Wells this past June. "I was especially impressed by the teen panel (from the Rochester diocese)," says Frawley. "It was a group of 10 teenagers who ... hit upon a lot of things I needed to know about my own teenagers as I'm dealing with them as a single parent — for example, discipline, drugs, sexuality, alcoholism in the home."

"Teenagers are going through such a developmental crisis anyway," she observes. "When it's compounded by having only one parent, it's difficult to identify (problems) as teenage problems or family problems."

Frawley adds that her family's "de-



Kim Mendall (right) watches Tim Scott empty a pitcher of water on spectators waiting for runners to met at camp last year.



Counselor Ken Pearce launches rockets built by parents and children in workshops the previous day.

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