

# 65th ANNIVERSARY: Making memories remains ideal of Camp Stella Maris

By Lee Strong  
Staff writer

LIVONIA — For 65 years, Camp Stella Maris has been — as the camp motto proclaims — a place where memories are made.

Betty Flynn remembers when former camp counselors came to her home in Mt. Morris during the off-season to visit and baby-sit her three sons. All of her sons spent summers at the camp.

Ray Tette remembers the day in the fall of 1976, when he toured Camp Stella Maris with Maurice J. Tierney — then-director of Catholic Charities, which ran the camp. Tierney asked Tette, who had served as program director at Camp Stella Maris the preceding summer, what changes he would make if he headed the facility.

The following spring, Tette was named the first lay executive director of Camp Stella Maris, a position he still holds.

And Max Russer recalls that, as a boy in the 1950s, he walked from his grandmother's house next to the camp to join the priests and seminarians serving there for morning Mass and prayers in the chapel.

"Memories that I made there, memories that were made for me, I can just never forget," said Russer, whose grandfather, Max, helped found Camp Stella Maris.

When the camp first opened in 1926, it had just 16 campers — all boys. The staff consisted of two seminarians, Gerald Lambert and Eugene Hudson. During its first full season, the camp had no permanent site, but the seminarians gave it the name Stella Maris: Star of the Sea.

Tette now oversees the year-round camp, which accommodates approximately 1,800 people during its eight-week summer season. The co-ed staff includes a broad range of people, from high school and college students, to adults who return for sessions during their vacations.

During the rest of the year, Camp Stella Maris serves thousands of people who come for retreats, day trips, and even a week of winter skiing.

The campgrounds span 26 acres, including a lake front, dense woods, a large garden campers help tend, and a man-made pond for fishing and swimming.

If the late Max Russer could see how the camp has grown since 1927, he might be surprised, Tette acknowledged. But he would still find the same spirit there, Tette added.

"What we try to stress here is something that Max Russer said," Tette stated. "This is a place for kids to have opportunities for spiritual, physical and social growth."

That philosophy helped guide Mr. Rus-



Ray Tette, the director of Camp Stella Maris for 14 years, holds a photo and news collage of Max Russer, one of the camp's founders.



ser in developing the camp, noted Max Russer, his grandson.

"I think he had a great concern for the emotional and spiritual development of children," Russer said of his grandfather. At the same time, he wanted to help create a camp that would emphasize the Catholic faith and instill Catholic values, Russer added.

The late Max Russer became involved with the camp in 1927, a year after the two seminarians started the camp. He purchased land on the shore of Conesus Lake to house the camp, intending to deed it to the diocese. Shortly after his death, his widow transferred the title to the camp to



Camping programs at Stella Maris are designed for people of all ages.

the diocese. She also donated \$10,000 to the diocese for Camp Stella Maris.

Russer recently donated a collage honoring his grandfather to the camp. The collage includes personal memorabilia and newspaper articles about the early days of Camp Stella Maris.

Russer recalled spending summers at his grandmother's house next to the camp in the 1950s. And he was a camper himself from 1955-57.

In the years since, Russer said he has worked at and directed a number of different camps, but none had the same feel of Stella Maris.

"There is a spirit in that camp that made it so uniquely itself that when campers left it they just pined for it," Russer said.

Betty Flynn said her three sons had the same feelings.

"There never was a time they did not want to go," Flynn said of her sons, who stayed at Stella Maris at various times from 1966-77.

Part of what sets Camp Stella Maris apart is its staff, Flynn noted. During the camp's early years, many of the counselors were also seminarians. Today, the staff consists mostly of non-seminarians. But they are carefully screened, Flynn noted.

"When you leave your children at the camp, you feel comfortable," she observed. "The association with those type of people (who are counselors) has to do something for you and your children."

Tette's first contact with Camp Stella Maris came when he was a seminarian in 1973. At that time, the camp was still run by Catholic Charities.

When Tette took over, he moved on to the property. In addition to seeing how the camp was used, he also developed a master plan for its development.

The diocese told him to proceed with his plan, Tette recalled, but that he would have to raise the money himself. Soon afterward, the camp became incorporated separately from Catholic Charities.

In his 14 years as executive director, Tette has expanded the camp grounds; overseen the construction of new buildings and a covered bridge to cross a busy road; developed the lake front; put in new recreational facilities; added permanent staff to help with the year-round operation; and obtained the money necessary to pay for the projects through appeals and grants.

Today Camp Stella Maris continues to provide what his grandfather had dreamed it would, Russer asserted. The camp is still a place that creates memories, he said, but not simply "memories of history."

"It's a memory that is built into a person," Russer concluded. "A memory that becomes part of that person's being."

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