

Shaped by Camp, Alumni Fight to Prevent Its Move

By [JOSEPH BERGER](#) SEPT. 6, 2015



Camp Rising Sun in Red Hook, N.Y. The camp has a \$10 million gap in its endowment. Credit Nathaniel Brooks for The New York Times

RED HOOK, N.Y. — They were teenagers spending a summer or two at sleepaway camp, but the memories never left them. Decades later, with those campers in middle and old age, the memories are stoking a fight to keep Camp Rising Sun where it is for other generations of youngsters.

Darren Aronofsky, 46, the Oscar-nominated director of “Black Swan,” remembers carrying logs down to Saw Mill Creek to build a sauna as a 16-year-old. It was the same creek where [Pete Seeger](#) spent time as a camper in the 1930s. He recalls spending a night alone by a campfire in a ritual known as Vigil, writing a letter to himself that would be opened when he was 21 so that he could take measure of how much he had grown.

Eli Attie, who became a special assistant to President Bill Clinton and a leading writer of the television shows “The West Wing” and “House,” remembers gaining a more cosmopolitan view of life in the summers of 1982 and ’83 by meeting boys from around the world and “beginning to see myself as part of a community in relation to other people.”



Darren Aronofsky, standing, at the camp in 1984. Credit Javier Carrasco

“It was the first time in my life that I wanted to work hard on things that weren’t just for me,” Mr. Attie said.

These formative memories help explain why a remarkable group of alumni — numbering over 600, according to J. C. Calderón, founder of the SaveCRS Group — has been [battling to sustain](#) the unconventional 85-year-old summer camp at its two locations. The group has [set up a website](#), started a petition drive, and cajoled [former campers](#) to make big donations.

Camp Rising Sun, known for its highly selective and global makeup, its free tuition and its emphasis on cultivating leaders, has been grappling with a \$10 million gap in what board members regard as an endowment large enough to finance camp operations. This past summer, the camp season was cut back from seven weeks to four each for boys and [girls](#). Facing an estimated \$2 million in costs to refurbish aging buildings, broken toilets and an outmoded kitchen, the governing board a year ago announced a plan to sell the boys’ site here (on the border with Rhinebeck) and the girls’ site a dozen miles south in Clinton Corners, N.Y., and move to a single, more economical and modern location, possibly in Pennsylvania.

After a feverish debate among alumni, the governing board announced on Friday that a flurry of last-minute donations helped the camp reach a goal of \$550,000 that will allow it to reopen next year for a full seven-week session at its present sites.

Many of the nation’s 7,000 sleepaway camps found themselves reeling after the financial meltdown of 2007-8, and some boarded up their cabins. But few have a worldwide alumni network that refuses to let a beloved touchstone of childhood disappear or move elsewhere.



A sign pointing to a place where campers can pitch their tents. Credit Nathaniel Brooks for The New York Times

The camp, which never hosts more than 120 teenagers, has produced such alumni as Neil Rudenstine, a former Harvard president; the film director Sidney Lumet; a former secretary of the Army, Clifford Alexander Jr.; and a former Israeli ambassador to Washington, Itamar Rabinovich. The thought of moving infuriated alumni like Mr. Aronofsky, who felt a single location would damage “the recipe.” Mr. Attie compared forsaking the site to losing another landmark of his youth.

“Should Harvard Yard move to Connecticut and become Hartford Yard?” Mr. Attie, a Harvard alumnus, said. “Places have a history based on the place itself, on the physical grounds.”

Dr. Patrick G. O’Malley, a Bethesda, Md., internist and 1980 camper who is board chairman of the Louis August Jonas Foundation, which owns Camp Rising Sun, remains agnostic on how essential the historical locations are. He praised the alumni for “rising to the occasion” but added that “the future remains uncertain” and could not assure that the camp could sustain both sites. Already, the board needs to raise an additional \$1.3 million by next September.

“The magic is not in the property but in the program itself,” he said.

The camp was started in 1930 by George E. Jonas, whose family made a fortune in felt hats. Mr. Jonas, known to generations of campers as Freddie, wanted to guide less privileged boys toward lives of service, and bought a 167-acre tract here for a camp.



Pete Seeger, center, who camped at Rising Sun in 1935, in an alumni photo in July 2012. Credit LAJF archives

He set up a foundation named for his father with a rich endowment so that boys from a variety of backgrounds, many poor, could attend free for one or two seasons. He kept the camp small, though it grew to 60 boys in the next few decades, with over 70 countries represented. The girls camp was started in 1989.

The camp offers typical summer activities, including swimming and table tennis. Campers sleep in tents set up on platforms, and they run things as much as possible, serving as sachems (an Algonquin Indian word for chief) for a day or a week and coming up with projects like construction of a sauna, totem pole or treehouse. There are sachems for more mundane matters, too, like peeling potatoes.

There are personal projects as well. Mr. Aronofsky painted expressive faces on a dead tree — which is still there, along with the sauna. Dr. O'Malley remembers a venture into theater marketing: putting up posters for the camp's production of "The Pirates of Penzance."

Potential campers are interviewed and selected on merit and geographical diversity, with the board working with a group of high schools in this country and abroad. In New York, the schools include Hunter College High School, Horace Mann School and Stuyvesant High School.

The purchase of the Clinton Corners site as a girls' camp, while widely applauded, took \$1 million out of the endowment, and made it harder to assure free tuition. The endowment stood at \$16 million before the beginning of the recession in 2007 — and is now \$12 million, according to Dr. O'Malley.



From left: Helene Mattera, the camp's program director; Stephen Bang, a camper in 1965 and '66 and a member of SaveCRS Group; and Damian Brennan, vice president and chief information officer at Artco Group, who was a camper in the summer of 1987. Credit Nathaniel Brooks for The New York Times

Many alumni feel that the board's plan for a single location would mean losing the virtue of letting boys and girls develop separately without the distractions and pressures of being around the opposite sex.

Tonya Buckler, 44, who served on the girls' staff for six years and directed the camp for one, joined the largely male alumni group in fighting to keep the camps where they are.

"Just because something gets old, you shouldn't throw it away," she said.

On Friday, two opponents in the debate toured the deserted camp here at the request of a reporter and often had clashing views on the buildings' viability.

Stephen Bang, summers of 1965 and '66, argued that "memory is tied to place."

Damian Brennan, summer of 1987, said he believed in looking forward. A more modern, efficient site would assure that "50 years from now, poor smart kids would benefit."

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