

IT TAKES A VILLAGE

CAMP HILL VILLAGE PROVIDES A RICH, REWARDING LIFE FOR ADULTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

By Deborah Malmo



When I travel back to the first time I saw Camp Hill Village, I stumble on the way. My mental landscape from that year is rutted and hard to work, like the rocky moraine of the Sauk Centre prairie, the site of Camp Hill Village. It was 1996, the year my mother died of cancer. For the first time in his life, my 58-year-old brother Lenny was going to have to find a place to live successfully on his own.

The word “mild” is often used to describe Lenny. He’s been diagnosed as a “mildly retarded adult male.” He’s been called “mild mannered.” Lenny is developmentally disabled, has an IQ in the high 60s, and needs guidance in his daily activities. He knows what makes a proper breakfast, but may leave the stove on and forget to put away the milk. His passivity and trusting nature make him vulnerable, too: Lenny would let a stranger into the house if one asked. The fact that Lenny can’t read, write, or perform simple math also makes it difficult for him to live independently. He is now 63, slight of frame, and, these days, light on hair.

Lenny was a beautiful child—dreamy, cornflower-blue eyes framed by a corona of golden curls—but his birth was inconvenient. No doctors were available when my mother was ready to deliver, so the nurses administered drugs to stop labor rather than proceed without a doctor. We can only speculate whether the resulting loss of oxygen caused his retardation. As a working woman, our mother couldn’t always be home during the day to care for Lenny and keep him safe. Day care wasn’t available when he was young.

So, over the years, he has lived in a variety of places. I have dark memories of Sunday visits to a state mental institution, the year I was 10. We came bearing false cheer: model train magazines, toy car kits, candy. It was a dark, rank-smelling cavern of a building with walls that echoed with the random wailings of residents who had all manner of mental conditions. Then there were depressing group homes with blaring TVs, aimless residents, institutional furniture, and, above all, a constant rotation of caregivers. “I was a little happy there,” Lenny says, forgivingly. Briefly, we tried independent living in an apartment. It didn’t work.

Even though the apartment was close to Mother’s home so she could check on him, Lenny didn’t keep the place clean. He didn’t eat well. His food spoiled. He burned things. And he watched TV endlessly. When my mother retired, she kept Lenny at home with her. But it was a challenge to keep him active and engaged.

When she was diagnosed with cancer, our family knew we needed to find another care facility for him: All of his siblings work, and it would be difficult to keep him at home.



At Camphill Village near Sauk Centre, the distinction between workers and residents is rarely drawn.





When we first learned of Camphill Village, we couldn't quite grasp the concept. A community farm where disabled adults could live and work? It had a huge garden, barns, cows, horses, and chickens. It had a bakery, a weavery, and a house for woodworking. It almost sounded too good to be true: a sort of bucolic Walden for people with special needs.

Viennese pediatrician Dr. Karl Koenig founded the international Camphill movement in Scotland in 1939. Koenig hoped to create communities where people of many abilities could live and work together in a purposeful and spiritual way. He worked to promote effective educational and therapeutic environments that also emphasized sensitivity toward others and the land.

The Camphill movement migrated to North America in 1961. Today there are 80 Camphill communities in 19 countries, including seven in North America. Camphill Village Minnesota was started in 1980.

About 20 developmentally or mentally disabled adults call Camphill Village home. They live in one of eight sprawling, comfortable homes with names like "Prairie Wind" or "Morning Glory."

These are simple houses filled with light from oversized windows designed to generously frame the prairie panorama. There are practical touches: built-in cubbies for villagers' coats and boots, handrails, and ramps in critical places.

Furniture is well worn and comfortable, some of it draped with hand-woven shawls and pillows. Walls are covered with inspirational paintings, poems, and drawings by villagers.

There are books in every house, Utne Reader magazines tucked among various texts on nature, farming, education, and spirituality.

Another 20 or so houseparents, workers and volunteers live and work alongside

"villagers" all day, every day. They do it in return for room and board—no paycheck.

How does it hold together, this untidy patchwork of people? What brings and keeps these idealists together, on these 400 acres of prairie farmland? "Everyone is here for different reasons," says Jan Zuzalek, a 13-year resident and worker at Camphill. For much of that time, she's been Camphill's head baker. "But we [workers] share some ideals and a commitment to living in a spiritual community."

Workers cite common goals such as living in balance with humanity and nature, participating in a community, and working with disabled people. While they are not required to hold any special degree or certification, they take a short orientation course offered by the Camphill Association.

In addition, because Camphill Village Minnesota is a state-licensed facility, workers are also required to attend state-sponsored training on the care of vulnerable adults. Many workers also participate in conferences and workshops geared to the Camphill philosophy on community and spiritual life.

Zuzalek began volunteering with special-needs children in 1980 and has served at other Camphill communities, including one in Finland. She was drawn to the Camphill approach because conventional living and learning settings for disabled people seemed too limiting.

"I was dissatisfied with what the public schools offered, and this



[Camphill] is so much better than the group homes.” She adds, with a quiet intensity, “What you do in your life every day ... for me, that’s what matters. I want to live and work in a way that brings out the best, the wholeness, in myself and others, as part of a community.”

Snowy-haired and soft spoken, Camphill worker Marianne Schneider is one of the older houseparents. “We don’t really distinguish between workers or houseparents and those with disabilities here,” she says. “We’re all just friends.”

For villagers, the workday might include tending the huge, four-acre garden, known statewide as a model of organic practice. Commercial coolers in the barn hold some of this year’s harvest: bags of bright green beans and mounds of knobby, yellow-skinned potatoes. Nearby, in the straw bale-walled greenhouse, dusty garlic bulbs are set out to dry.

Another popular work site is the woodshop, where carefully supervised villagers learn to carve wooden toys and implements.

In the weavery, villagers learn to work the beautiful wooden loom. Other folks cut and tear old jeans into strips for colorful rag rugs.

But of all the workstations, the bakery is best loved. It’s the source of Camphill’s signature, sand dollar-sized cookies including oatmeal-sunflower seed and Andy’s Cookies, a dense and toothsome chocolate fantasy with a coconut stubble.

Camphill uses mostly organic ingredients in its baked goods, some of them village-grown. Residents grow their own organic rye and wheat for European rye and Dakota whole wheat bread, and grind the grains at a local mill.

The eggs are gifts of the skittish, calico-patterned, free-range chickens seen poking around the farm grounds. In the Twin Cities, Camphill Village baked goods can be found at the North Country Co-op, near the West Bank of the University of Minnesota’s Minneapolis campus.

“I like probably the bakery most,” says Sarah D., a 20-something who joined the village four years ago. She’s bubbly and blue-eyed, an affectionate young woman who felt a little homesick at first, but after two months reported feeling “at home” at Camphill. “It’s nice. I like walking,” she says.

Sarah is the self-appointed village scribe, willingly writing notes and letters on behalf of Lenny and other villagers. She has many different jobs depending on the day, from working in the bakery and garden to cleaning house, weaving, and working in the processing kitchen.





In a spontaneous act of self-expression, Sarah recently shaved her head. It's a startling contrast to her soft features and shape, but she doesn't appear self-conscious—and no one seems to make much of it. A sense of ready acceptance pervades the village.

Sara M. goes about her daily chores the way many fellow villagers do—as if their community depended on it. In fact, it does. “I'm not a country girl, but I'm getting used to it,” says Sara, a vibrant 22-year-old. She recently moved to Camphill from the Twin Cities, where she lived with her parents. She's quick to laugh, smile, and hug.

Sara loves to sing for anyone who will listen, and to host exuberant slumber parties. Her cooking, cleaning, and social skills are in great demand in the village.

“When people first visit, they often say how peaceful it is here,” says Zuzalek. “But often—it's not peaceful!” Human dynamics and conflicts come into play every day, often with heightened intensity because of villagers' special challenges. There are outbursts, fights, tears, and frustration.

And with work-filled days that begin as early as 6:30 a.m., daily life is physically and emotionally demanding. Every day, the villagers follow a simple but structured schedule that helps keep them focused and engaged on many levels.

Except for a single TV used once weekly on movie night, television and computer games are not available. Instead, villagers are encouraged to read, listen to or perform music, and pursue other creative activities.

Simple community activities like preparing and sharing meals

are the hub of the day. Meals are approached with a sense of reverence and gratitude, and villagers take part in preparation or clean up.

Each house prepares simple, homemade meals made from homegrown ingredients whenever possible. The noon meal is the mainstay of the day, and often includes a hearty, vegetable-filled casserole or fragrant soup. The evening meal is lighter fare—perhaps homemade bread, peanut butter, cheese, or some of the best strawberry jam and salsa I've ever had, and maybe a cup of Edge of the Prairie tea, one of Camphill's private labels.

In pleasantly cluttered kitchens filled with potted plants and jars of homegrown seasonings and teas, the table is a commanding presence. It is a





circular expanse of gleaming wood that's about eight feet in diameter. It's beautifully grained and well crafted. Each house has one. Schneider says they are custom-made for the village: a symbol of continuity, strength, and community spirit.

At mealtime, a second circle forms around the table as hands are clasped and held high; voices unite in a simple, nondenominational prayer at the beginning and end of each meal.

At Camphill, no seasonal or Christian celebration goes unobserved. Festivals, pageants, and music mark the cycles of nature, and saints' days are commemorated, too.

Nature's seasonal vestiges—leaves, flowers, rocks, or feathers—are honored with a prominent display in each home. A special table or spot is set aside as a reliquary, a kind of earthly altar to honor nature.

New houses, new residents, babies, and even a new manure spreader are causes for merrymaking. Villagers sing and make music with a modest bell choir. They participate in healing arts workshops. They compete in the Special Olympics. They bowl in leagues, play on basketball teams, let loose at bingo and pizza parties. And they practice

eurhythm, a therapeutic form of rhythmic movement taught by Schneider.

While the village hums with song and a steady pastoral pulse—the drone of beehives, the gossip of windblown grasses—another current courses through each day: the flow of administrative and financial work performed by Camphill administrative workers Bill Briggs, Sheryl March, and others.

There are the usual imperatives of self-governance along with required reporting to agencies, families, and the Camphill Association. The village is run by consensus, and workers attend regular meetings to discuss operational concerns, special needs of the villagers, and new goals and initiatives.

In the future, the community hopes to become more involved in public life and outreach by sharing knowledge of new, organic farming practices, community life, and more. Co-workers also talk of the need to find the next generation of caretakers, which has yet to emerge.

In the past, volunteers have been an important source of new workers, but the supply, along with the social idealism of the '60s, seems to be dwindling. The outreach efforts should help Camphill to dispel any associations of "weirdness" among the larger community.

Although townspeople are welcome and invited, few have come to see the village firsthand. Jim Bergmann, a new Camphill board member, says that his first impression was of a community of "vegetarians and religious fanatics."

But Zuzalek notes that townspeople are usually warm-hearted toward disabled people and even inquire after a particular villager they've met. A nearby doctor and sheriff have become good friends to the village.

Camphill sells small quantities of its baked goods, honey, and herbs to local and Twin Cities co-ops and offers wooden crafts, rugs, handmade dolls and other items at craft fairs and at its annual Fall Festival.

But while the village aims at becoming self-sustaining, it's not there yet. Once the Village Center facility is completed this fall, Camphill may be a bit closer to self-sustenance: The center will include a fully equipped commercial kitchen so workers can more easily process large batches of produce for sale.



On my first visit after Lenny moved to Camphill Village, I had to locate the place by mile marker: 177. After a long, dusty drive down a winding gravel road I finally spotted the mailbox: “Camphill Bakery.” I turned in and drive past a ranch-style home, the bakery, and, finally, up the hill at the end of the road, saw Aurora House—Lenny’s new home—perched on a gentle hill and overlooking other homes in the distance.

The back yard was a vast open prairie, framed by a spectacle of sky. I walked to the front door, knocked, and went in. There was no doorbell, not even a lock.

A jumble of boots and Birkenstocks littered the plant-filled entry, and I breathed in the deep, earthy smell of root vegetables cooking. There is a powerful sense of purpose and belonging here, and it has worked a bit of magic on Lenny and his disabled friends.

I had never seen Lenny so energized—so *present*—as when I saw him perform his pre-dinner routine. He moved surely and without instruction, fetching plates from the cupboard, setting the table, filling the cat dishes, placing bread in the basket. Our mother would have been thrilled.

Lenny’s work schedule now alternates between cleanup duties for different houses and working in the bakery. (He solemnly told me he’d stopped swiping cookies.) Because he’s older and tires easily, Lenny gets extra time off.

A bit of an introvert, Lenny enjoys spending free time in his cozy upstairs bedroom, filled with his model trains, a marionette, family pictures, and a shrine to his enduring crush: Olivia Newton-John.

Years later, I am visiting Camphill for Lenny’s annual care review meeting. We are gathered at yet another massive round table in the cool quiet of the village meeting room.

Sheryl March, Camphill program director, poses the final, required question: “So, Leonard, do you want to continue living here at Camphill?”

For a few breathless seconds, this small, gentle man holds us captive.

He delights in withholding his answer, reveling in the attention of six sober sets of eyes: a county case manager, self-determination caseworker, program director, two housemothers, and me. Coyly, he waits, then eases out his answer. “Yesssss,” he exhales slowly, his blue eyes twinkling.

And now, when I make the drive to Camphill to see Lenny, I no longer need the mile marker for guidance. I know that this journey was less about finding a place for Lenny to live than discovering another, more hopeful way of living. MM

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For more information on Camphill Village, call 320-732-6365.