



The Colgate Scene: People On the Go (Camp Starfish)

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At first glance, Camp Starfish in Brewster, Massachusetts, looks like any other children's camp.

"But if you look closely," Executive Director Deb Berman '95 points out, "you'll see that each child is swimming with their own swim counselor, the soccer game is ten children and eight staff members, and three counselors and seven campers are doing arts and crafts."

A unique one-to-one camper-to-staff ratio allows Camp Starfish to serve children, often from abusive and impoverished backgrounds, who have emotional, behavioral and learning problems, in a highly structured, predictable program that readily helps them build self-esteem and overcome difficulties.

"Many are used to being told that they're bad," Berman explains. "We do a lot of catching the children at being good. Here you'll see children being told they're doing a good job because they're sitting quietly. Or, a child may dip his foot into the water. He's going to get a round of applause, because he's been afraid of the water. For many, it's the first time they're enmeshed in a structure that is designed so completely for their safety and success."

Campers are referred by an agency, counselor or other professional and are selected through an application process and interview.



Berman, who majored in education and sociology, says she "got passionate about dealing with this population of children at Colgate, both in and outside my classes." She worked with emotionally disturbed children at Ramapo Anchorage Camp in Rhinebeck, N.Y., for several summers.

"I did my senior thesis on my experiences at Ramapo, and my last sentence said that we need more programs like camps to provide children with safe, structured environments in the summertime to help overcome social problems. At that point, I set a goal to start something on my own."

Berman originally created Camp Starfish as a project in business school at Boston University; it immediately became a reality. Co-founder Richard Hobish was a board member at Ramapo, and it took two years to complete the start-up phase, which included forming a board of directors, obtaining 501(c)3 nonprofit status, securing a location, recruiting staff, marketing the camp, and raising funds.

"I was really vocal and aggressive about saying I needed help," Berman remembers, "and I was super-excited. I think that was contagious to people." Financial support comes from individuals as well as foundations and corporations.

Camp Starfish opened last summer, with two 3 1/2-week sessions that served more than 90 campers and attracted significant media coverage. Three Colgate students worked as counselors: Brandon Malmberg '03, who did a January internship in the winter office in Boston and returned this summer in a supervisory capacity, Kelly Roos '02, and Jessica Parshley '01. Johanna Poch '03 is a counselor this summer.

Although maintaining a work-life balance is a challenge, the successes provide much satisfaction for Berman. An unsolicited letter from a mother detailing the transformation of her son, who has an attachment disorder, into a child willing to cuddle, struck a chord.

"It's been an amazing experience."

<http://www4.colgate.edu/scene/july2001/people.html>