

Camp Jened Newspaper Archive Collection: The Spark of A Movement*

Introduction by Denise Sherer Jacobson

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I recently reconnected with an old friend, Mike Masters, whom I went to camp with in the mid-sixties and seventies. A few weeks later, he discovered a file hidden away in a bookcase containing copies of Camp Jened summer newspapers filled with editorials, interviews, playbills, and articles written by adolescent campers with disabilities, many of whom would go on to become disability rights' activists and advocates and work in the trenches of independent living centers. These newspapers—typed on manual and electric typewriters, run off on a mimeograph machine—offer insights and ruminations reflecting the thoughts and feelings about disability from youth who were mindful of living in a society that had a very limited view of our usefulness. As Judy Heumann, who had attended Jened as first a camper, and later as staff, stated in her oral history, Camp Jened provided “... an opportunity, ..., because you were together with people for ... four, eight weeks, ..., to talk about things in a more in-depth way. Just regular teenage things, as well as personal and feelings and things like that.” Like Judy, several former Jened campers and staff interviewed for Disability Rights and Independent Living Movement (DRILM) Oral History Project have mentioned the role Camp Jened had played in their teen and young adult years. As adolescents at the crossroads of a very uncertain adulthood (a time before having options for independence, hiring attendants, and laws like 504 of the Rehabilitation Act and the Americans with Disabilities Act [ADA]), Jened offered us the opportunity to be 'regular teenagers,' free of the restraints placed on us by our families, the paternal mentality of the medical model and educational system, and the physical barriers of the outside world. Jened was our Utopia, even though the cabins would never have passed ADA standards!

Located at the foot of Hunter Mountain (a winter ski resort area) in the heart of the Catskills of New York State, Camp Jened was one of the few summer recreation facilities that catered to adolescence with disabilities, as well as to children and adults. Although a majority of campers came from New York City (like myself), several came from upstate, out-of-state, and even Canada, to stay for either a four- or eight-week session.

In the course of doing research for another project about Camp Jened in 2009, I found nuggets of information tucked away in the Town of Hunter library as well as on the internet. I chose to include a brief background of the property's history, and the camp's establishment and development in this introduction because it adds a unique dimension to the geographic and social relevance related to the impact it had on adolescents with disabilities in the mid-1960s and 70s.

Spread over 6.30 acres, the land was originally purchased by Edward Fast, circa late 1890s, to be used as a summer resort for up-and-coming Jews (leaning toward Socialist ideology) who, because of the anti-Semitic sentiment of that era, were barred from admittance into Country Clubs and other recreational facilities. In the late 1930s, his son, Sam, transformed it into a boys camp. In 1952, speech therapist Leona Burger and special education teacher Nora (Honora) Rubenstein acquired the property from Sam Fast and started a camp for children and adults with disabilities. According to a recent conversation I had with Nora, the camp's name was derived from Sam's parents, Jenny and Ed. The two women ran the camp for fourteen years, and set up the Jened Foundation in 1962. When the two women relinquished the reins (as their young children got older), the foundation hired Jack Birnbaum, a social worker by trade, who had been director of Camp Oakhurst (a similar camp which had a limited teen program). Jack brought with him Larry Allison, a former Oakhurst counselor to become the unit head of teen camp at Jened. Larry, another DRILM Oral History Project participant, became camp director in the early 1970s.

Jened was theoretically divided into three distinct units—adult camp, junior camp, and teen camp. The adult section was located near the camp's entrance, up a slight incline, secluded only by a thicket of bushes. The adults had their own cozy, wood panel dining room with a stone fireplace and piano. The room connected to a large kitchen which also served the combined funkier dining room of teen and junior camps. A wide, “j”-shaped path wended its way from the camp's entrance, marked by two stone pillars anchoring an arching wrought-iron “Camp Jened” lettered sign, to the rec hall at the far end of the property where the teen cabins were located. The junior camp's cabins lined the path between adult and teen camps. Somehow, except for the few occasions which brought everyone together, the three divisions were enclaves unto themselves.

I first attended Camp Jened in 1966, the summer I was sixteen. The friendships I made that summer, and subsequent summers, with both campers and staff (many of whom would return summer after summer) have lasted throughout the years, even as we went onto college and began to develop our disability rights activism. Jened was a place we could escape the restrictions and stereotypes that society had ascribed to us as people with disabilities since the time we were children. In addition, we were exposed to the liberal ideas of primarily college-age staff during the era of the Civil Rights Movement, the draft and Vietnam War protests, and the ideology of folk music, imbuing our hearts and minds with what we affectionately acknowledged and would forever remember as the “Jened Spirit.”

In the early Spring of 2011, with social networking in full swing, one former Jened counselor started the Camp Jened (Official) Facebook page. [Another Camp Jened Facebook page had already existed; however, although the name was the same, this Camp Jened wasn't located in Hunter. The explanation is discussed later in this introduction.] News of the Facebook page spread by word of mouth and via email. Old-time Jenedians posted vintage photos from the mid-1960s and 70s; some faces and names readily familiar, some more elusive causing a flurry of back and forth postings to jog

our 40- and 50-year-old memories. The buzz began about having a reunion, though people were living all over the country, some in other parts of the world. A majority still lived in the New York/Northeast area, but several had made our way to the San Francisco/Bay Area and neighboring cities. There were also surprises—posts from staff who had worked at Jened in the 1950s, and a comment from the granddaughter of a co-founder, which subsequently led to my previously mentioned telephone conversation with Nora Rubenstein. She later sent me a collection of assorted papers from her tenure as co-director. Two of those items are included in these papers: The first, a Camp Jened Brochure containing pictures of the site, circa 1954, as it had appeared during its heyday (except I don't remember the lake looking as massive). The second, the original letterhead stationary notes, with prestige, Honorary Board Members, U.S. Senators Jacob K. Javits and Kenneth B. Keating of New York, and New York City Mayor Robert F. Wagner.

Fueled by the excitement of the upcoming Jened West Coast reunion the following August, and the renewing old friendships, I decided to do some sleuthing to find Mike Masters. Mike was one of those gentle-souled people who read Gibran and listened to Judy Collins. He had lived in Massachusetts and started going to Jened when he was four years old, having the distinction of being the youngest camper. We met my first summer at Jened and remained friends throughout young adulthood, though we saw each other infrequently. At one point, we both went to Long Island University (LIU, the Brooklyn Campus) and co-founded HIM (the Handicapped Integration Movement), a student disability rights organization, in 1969. In 1970, HIM, along with its counterpart PUSH (People United in Support of the Handicapped) at Hofstra University on Long Island, co-sponsored a citywide disability forum (at LIU) which spearheaded the inception of Disabled In Action, Inc.—the major grassroots organization which still figures prominently in disability rights activism in the northeastern United States (and is discussed in more detail in several DRILM oral histories). After

college, Mike settled back up in the Boston area, but we would see each other when he'd come visit New York City or when we'd bump into each other attending disability rights protests and meetings in Washington, D.C. Mike and I completely lost contact when I moved to California in January, 1978.

Armed with my old (antiquated) black address book, I went on the Switchboard.com website and, by process of elimination, found an address and phone number. With a bit of anxiety (faced with the dilemma of whether or not someone wants to be found), I left a message on a voice-mail. I couldn't be sure I had reached the correct number because it was a female voice who had instructed me to leave a message. Hours later, Mike returned my call, in amazement that I had been able to find even "a recluse" like him. We briefly caught up on each other's lives; he still lived in Massachusetts and ran a dog training school with his wife Fran. We exchanged email addresses and began corresponding regularly. Not more than two weeks after our initial contact, I received an email with "Incredible Find!" in the subject line.

"This is just too freaky. I just whacked an old bookcase with my power chair and several things fell out. As I was stuffing them back in, I glanced inside one of the folders and it was filled with Camp Jened newsletters (newspapers) we wrote back in the years 1966 through 1968. There are a couple that aren't clearly marked and I don't clearly remember so I'm (not) sure of the dates. They are absolutely wonderful !!! Events and people I haven't thought much about but really loved... There is so much stuff here that I feel as blown away as the rest of New England was by Hurricane Irene. ...

Are you interested in looking at these old newsletters?"

They arrived by Priority Mail a week later!

I poured through the weathered pages of editorials, articles, gossip columns, and winsome poetry, all written by campers, which captured the sentiments regarding disability before there was a Disability Rights and Independent Living Movement. The newspapers presented not only a

commentary on the language and views pertaining to disability during that time—philosophizing about how best to accept one's handicap, debating whether a handicapped person should date someone “normal”—but also provided a glimpse of an evolving perspective of opportunities and rights for people with disabilities, evidenced by the editorial and article written on Disabled In Action in the newspaper titled REVIVAL, August, 1970. Several articles indicated changes that happened within camp itself. The administrative staff, realizing the need for the older teen campers to be challenged, learn responsibilities, and experience self-awareness and independence initiated an experimental Big Brother program, in the summer of 1967, for the male campers in the B-6 (the oldest boys teen bunk) to help out with younger campers. Kim (Kipp) Watson of B-6 wrote in the August 1967 newspaper, REFLECTIONS, expressing the hope that the program would continue and be “expanded as a permanent CIT program...” Work Camp was established the next summer, marked by an article co-written by participants Frieda Tankus and Denise Sherer (yours, truly) in CONCISE THOUGHTS, the July 1968 newspaper, co-edited by Neil Jacobson—DRILM oral history interviewee (and my spouse).

I spent my last summer in New York working at Jened as the ADL (Activities of Daily Living) specialist and running Sexuality & Disability education and discussion groups for teen and adult campers. Sheldon Koy & David Arnou ran the camp as co-directors, having begun their career affiliation with Jened in 1967 when they were co-counselors. (Shelly had known about Jened from his parents, who both had polio and would spend their two-week summer vacation as campers in adult camp.) David shared, in a recent email, that he directed the camp (solo) for one more summer, proposing to the Jened Foundation Board of Directors a plan to “grow” the camp as a year-round program, and to also included a rental facility for skiers during the winter to generate income. He had even secured partial funding. Instead, the Board decided to transfer the property to UCP (United Cerebral Palsy) of New York State, with the promise of having the agency keep the Camp Jened name.

Wanting the camp's location nearer to New York City, UCP chose to move the campsite to Rock Hill, NY, and reopened it in 1980 (hence, the first Facebook page mentioned previously), to serve adults over eighteen having a range of physical and developmental disabilities. The site remains there, although it's been closed since 2006 because of financial difficulties

During my 2009 visit to Hunter, I stopped by the old Jened campsite. The stone pillars still graced the entrance, but little else remained. The property went through a series of sales from May, 1999 to October, 2001, when it was bought by Tree Top LLC which divided the land into rentals to a trucking company and to an individual living in his mobile home. All the original buildings and cabins built by the Fast family have been destroyed by fire, the “j” path and the lake had disappeared, long overgrown by tall grass and bushes. Yet, when I closed my eyes and listened to the familiar rush of the creek as it flowed along the rim of the property, picturing the camp as it was at the pinnacle of a summer season, I could feel the presence of that old Jened Spirit. It's the same spirit that is captured in the writings of these newspapers—writings which indicate the spark of a movement!

**I'd like to express my appreciation to Mike Masters for his generous consent in donating the Camp Jened newspapers the Bancroft Library Archives. I also offer my thanks to Nora Rubenstein, David Arnou, Sheldon Koy, and Sarah Dunham for helping me ferret out the scattered bits of information that proved vital in telling the Camp Jened story.*