

Longtime fan of summer camp realizes dream, starts his own



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Forget autumn, winter and spring. Rick Mades is all about summer.

The 46-year-old Delray Beach resident has spent a good chunk of his life longing for the season of star-filled skies, open fires, roasted marshmallows, swimming in the lake and making lifelong friends — something he first experienced at age 9 at Camp Cedar in Maine.



Eliza Gutierrez/The Post

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After years of working at summer camps, Delray resident Rick Mades started a residential summer camp in Maine. He taught math at Saint Andrews School in Boca Raton for a few years, but left to start a camp referral service and a camp staffing Web site. The Maine camp is Mades' dream come true.

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Arts, and spends one month out of each summer working nonstop.

Even though his camp is a little different from a traditional eight-week camp, he hopes his campers will come away with fond memories of the experience, like he did of his six years at Camp Cedar, he said.

"My friends at home would ask me if I ever get homesick being away for so long," Mades remembered his buddies from his hometown of Belmont, Mass., just outside Boston, asking him. "I'd tell them 'No, I get campsick.' "

Mades grew up in a family of campers. His parents went to overnight camp and so did his three siblings.

"It was a tradition in my family," said Mades, who attended Camp Cedar for eight weeks at a time.

At 20, Mades took the role of cabin counselor at Camp Samoset, a boys' sports camp in Maine that his father went to as a child. During his eight years at the camp, Mades became a tennis instructor and director.

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Mades had been playing tennis since boyhood and he started taking it seriously at 13, playing a few days a week.

"It was great being out on the tennis court with the kids with no pressure from school or home in the way," he said.

During part of that time, Mades, who already had a bachelor's degree in economics from Tufts University in Boston, taught tennis for a living. Although he has no children of his own, his love of working with children took him back to his alma mater, where he earned a master's degree in education.

"I loved teaching tennis, but my mind wasn't being pushed enough," said Mades, who moved to Florida and taught math at Saint Andrews School in Boca Raton from 1990 to 1994.

But summer camp was always his first love.

In 1994, Mades founded a free camp referral service, CampFinders.com, which he owns and runs. On his own dime, Mades visited about 170 overnight camps and talked to thousands of parents, with the goal of trying to find the perfect camp to meet each family's needs.

"It works kinda like a travel agency," he said. "The camp pays if I place a child with them."

Mades also started MySummers.com, a staffing site for camp directors and potential employees.

After years of attending, working for and researching camps, there was only one thing left for Mades to do: start his own.

It was something he always wanted to do and his girlfriend, Candy Cohn-Glider, gave him the push he needed to found Bethel Camp for the Arts. She is the camp's assistant director.

"It made sense, it is an industry I know well," said Mades.

His experience taught him he could fill a niche that others hadn't. He found that the traditional four- to eight-week camps were too long for some parents. His camp in Bethel, Maine, is only two weeks long. There are two separate sessions.

He also found that many parents were looking for non-competitive camps that focused on arts, technology and individual sports, rather than team sports. Camp Bethel for the Arts' activities include pottery, painting, acting, chorus, hip-hop dance, ballet, Web design, rocketry and cooking. And the sports are all individual: golf, tennis, archery, kayaking and yoga, among others.

For Mades, the economic gamble he made has paid off. The first year, Mades had 48 campers and a staff of 12, and that was without referrals and very little promotion. This summer, he'll have 185 campers and a staff of 35.

Even though camp isn't just about playing anymore, Mades still relishes every minute of it.

"I can't wait to get to Maine," he said. "I guess you can say at heart, I'm really just a big kid."