

Printed in Family Circle Magazine, May 9, 2000

“It’s a place where Joey has found **love** and acceptance.”

▶▶▶▶▶▶ From page 15

Anderson Woods

By Maureen Hayden

Joey Bradford was up at the crack of dawn, ready to begin the morning’s chores at Anderson Woods, a working-family farm in Indiana that doubles in the summer as a residential camp. His job that morning would be to help feed a barn full of animals, clean out a horse’s stall, and begin gathering vegetables from the garden for the noon meal. “Let’s go,” Bradford called to Anna Clark, the camp director.

If he could have, Bradford would have launched into the chores all by himself—but Bradford is blind. Diagnosed as a young child with mental retardation and other disabilities, Bradford, now 39, had grown up learning about all the things he couldn’t do. But on summer mornings at Anderson Woods he is learning about all the things he can do.

For Joey Bradford’s mother, Anderson Woods was an answer to a prayer. “It’s a place where he has found friendship,” said Gay Bradford. “It’s a place where he’s found love and acceptance.”

Nestled in the rolling hills of southern Indiana, Anderson Woods is a place where limitations aren’t liabilities, but rather challenges to overcome. The camp was created by Mary Julia “Judy” Colby, affectionately known as “the earth angel” by the family members of campers who return each summer. Judy designed Anderson Woods as a place where adults with physical and mental disabilities could come for a few days to work and play in ways they’d never experienced before.

“My son has fallen in love with Anderson Woods,” says Karen James, whose 32-year-old son, Tom Yearly, has been a camper for 10 years. “It’s been life-changing for him, and for me, to realize how much he can really do on his own.”

Those are powerful words for the woman who established Anderson Woods 22 years ago. “I’m still amazed at what happens here,” says Judy. “Some days I stand in wonder at what God has given me.”

Judy considers Anderson Woods to be a gift, one that has slowly grown in riches since the very first summer when she and a handful of volunteers welcomed three campers to the farm.

That was back in 1978, two years after Judy and her husband, David, had completed their purchase of 175 acres of land near the town of Saint Meinrad, Indiana. The property was to be a getaway for Judy, the owner of an insurance agency for heavy construction contractors, and the mother of 6 children. However, both she and David—a divorced father of 3 when they married in 1976—had always wanted to do something different with the land.

Judy says she had hoped that David would agree to a



Judy Colby, right and above, says everyone attending Anderson Woods leaves behind a little goodness.



camp. “I told him I had always had this dream of doing something to help people with disabilities,” says Judy. It was an idea she had nurtured since she was a young child, watching her mother raise Judy’s older brother who was mentally retarded. “She always focused on what he could do, not what he couldn’t,” Judy says.

David enthusiastically endorsed the plan. Both of his sons had been born with muscular dystrophy and he, too, wanted to create a special place for his children and others with disabilities. So Judy turned to a friend, Sister Beata Mehling, O.S.B., a Catholic nun who was the principal of a special-needs day school in Evansville, Indiana. What did she think, Judy asked her, about inviting a few of Sister Beata’s older students to spend a night or two on the Colbys’ farm? The response? An immediate “Yes!”

Soon after, Judy and Sister Beata were setting up a campground. They cut firewood, pitched tents, built a campfire, and introduced three campers to the great outdoors. Exhausted after the short adventure, they patted themselves on the back and then began to wonder: Could they do it again? “And we’ve been coming back every summer since!” laughs Judy.

Anderson Woods now has 9 separate 4-day sessions for the more than 100 campers who attend annually. The tents have been replaced by cabins that have been built with the help of campers. Each session now accommodates 12-15 campers, who make quick friends with the multitude of volunteers and college students who make up the camp staff. The camp costs \$60 a session, a fee Judy has waived for campers whose families can’t afford it.

Judy, meanwhile, won’t take much credit for what Anderson Woods has become. “I finally figured out what makes this place special is that everybody who comes here leaves behind a little bit of the ‘good’ in them,” says Judy. “The good has accumulated over the years and turned this place into something wonderful. You can feel the love that’s been shared here.”

For more information about Anderson Woods, call Judy Colby at (812) 357-2325.

Maureen Hayden is a writer in Evansville, Indiana.

16 **Family Circle** 5/9/00