

Anderson Woods

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As a visitor walks up the rock road to the heart of Anderson Woods, distant voices become clearer with each step.

The laughter and singing do not disclose that one of the campers relies on a white cane to get around, another uses a walker, several wear hearing aids.

And none of those physical trappings reveal how many campers have Down syndrome or less obvious mental handicaps, how many need medication regularly and how many follow special diets.

At Anderson Woods in rural Perry County, all of the campers are adults and every one of them has a disability of one kind or another.

"It is our strong belief that as 'normal' adults we have two very important choices in life," says Judy Colby, who knew as soon as she saw the Bristow farm in 1975 that she wanted to buy it and build a camp there for the enjoyment of people with mental disabilities like her older brother, Joe Hussel. Hussel lived at the Providence Home in Jasper for 22 years until his death last August.

"One of these choices is where we will live and the other is what type of work we will do. Mentally handicapped persons usually have neither of these choices," Colby says.

In 1977, three handicapped adults participated in a three-day camp at Anderson Woods. They ate outdoors and slept in tents.

The camp grew, and within a couple of years cabins replaced tents and a mess hall replaced open-air dining. Camp offered an independent living skills program for six weeks each summer, with up to 10 campers attending all six weeks.

The program taught everything from getting along with others to cooking and laundry to hygiene and nutrition.

Based on that experience, handicapped adults could decide if they liked doing things on their own rather than relying on others for constant assistance.

"Quite a few of the campers would return every summer. And from that, the parents had said it would be so good if they could just live with each other the year 'round and have this experience all the time," says Sister Beata Mehling, who directed the camp for 13 years.

In 1992, Anderson Woods opened two homes in Siberia, Ind. Most of the first residents had attended the summer camp for several years.

In 1998, the Anderson Woods residential homes continue, two in Siberia and one in Bloomington. The camp, too, continues, though a six-week learning program has been reshaped into eight weeks, more for enjoyment than education, for a dozen or more campers each session.

First thing Monday morning, camp director Anna Clark goes through the handful of rules campers must follow at Anderson Woods.

1. When you're assigned to a group, stay with it.
2. If you get lost, start yelling and continue to yell until your group leader returns to you.
3. When it's your turn to do dishes, don't try to get out of it.

Anna abruptly turns to camper Shawn Riney. "You're lost," she says. "What do you do?"

Shawn thinks for a few seconds. He looks at his fellow-campers surrounding him. He looks, in turn, at Anna and the other counselors, most of them familiar faces from last year and the year before that.

"I'm not lost," Shawn states matter-of-factly.

Campers and counselors alike burst out in laughter.

When Moggie Riney picked Shawn up after his first week at camp, counselor Rick Kurzendoerfer hugged him tightly before saying good-bye. Rick, 17, started helping out at camp several summers ago after his aunt, who is mentally handicapped, introduced him to the place.

Shawn, 26, started attending camp at about the same time. This year, eight first-time campers came with him from Owensboro, Ky.

"I kind of wanted them to see it on their own," says Mrs. Riney, who helped coordinate transportation for the Owensboro contingent but didn't tell the campers much about what to expect.

All but one of the campers want to come back again next summer, for at least two weeks, she reported.

They look forward to again sleeping in cabins, showering outdoors, fishing, roasting hotdogs over a fire and even pulling weeds.

"I like everything about it. I like working in the garden. I like going hiking. I like the people around me. I like it all," says 51-year-old Judy Carrico, who lives with her mother in Owensboro.

Joel Farmer checked out of a convalescent home for the week, and Butch Freels spent the week away from Roosevelt House, where he has his own apartment.

While Joel, Butch and the others look forward to returning to camp next year, Shawn had already signed up for additional weeks this summer. He has returned to Anderson Woods four weeks thus far.

All of the staff members enjoy him, in part because he serves as a good example to new campers.

Being raised with four younger siblings, Shawn knows how to get along with others. Having worked full time in an elementary school cafeteria for four years, he also brings a work ethic to camp with him. "You don't want people to babysit him," Mrs. Riney says. "You want him to be productive."

Mrs. Riney likes that the week does not merely entertain her son. In addition to fun activities — tie-dying T-shirts, playing kickball and fishing — campers have chores to do each day, including dishes, gardening and caring for the llamas, horses and sheep that live on the 175-acre farm.

Making animals part of camp was important to Colby, who says that tending the animals allows campers to feel needed. They have always known what it feels like to need, she said, but for many of the campers, this is their first experience reciprocating.

Tending the farm animals is one example of how Anderson Woods "is down to the basics. There's no air about it," says Mrs. Riney. "I mean, they walk in a dirty, old, muddy creek."

Creek-walking ranks among the most popular activities at camp. So does mowing grass, a task Mrs.

Riney never thought about allowing her son to do before, "even with us walking along."

To their credit, the counselors "don't have the same fears we have as parents," she says.

Near the women's cabin, Anna Clark helps four campers plant geraniums in decorative pots.

"OK, kids," Anna begins.

Judy Carrico immediately interrupts her: "We're not kids."

Anna realizes her mistake in addressing the campers as children and quickly covers for it. "Well, I'm not a kid, either, but I like being called one. Is that OK?"

"But you're not a kid," Judy responds in a voice creamy with Southern accent. "You're a darlin'. You're a honey."

Judy wins. "OK, Sweetie," Anna replies.

There is no mistaking Anderson Woods' counselors, volunteers and house parents for shiftworkers found at institutions.

Anna, 21, cannot imagine a more satisfying job in a more satisfying environment than the one she became acquainted with seven years ago. Living in nearby Uniontown, she volunteered at camp for two years and then became a paid counselor for three (a counselor is "paid" with a \$1,500 college scholarship). This is her second year as camp director.

Although a senior in college, Anna doesn't see her affiliation with Anderson Woods ending. "If I'm not here all summer long, I'll probably be part of it all my life," the future nurse says, adding that she can't imagine life without the campers.

"Sometimes you see them in town (Siberia) and they know you. That's really special," she says.

Anna directs a staff of three counselors, and additional volunteers come and go each day. Cora Clark, Anna's younger sister, takes care of maintenance. Younger brother Levi and Kevin Fritz are counselors in training. Twelve-year-old Levi made a special effort this summer to learn sign language so he could communicate with one of the campers.

Adam Stenftenagel, of Jasper, comes and goes in charge of a kitchen crew. Some days, 13-year-old Daniel Murphy, also of Jasper, helps out, earning service hours toward confirmation. Father Earl Rohleder shows up each Thursday, and Kathy Reitz is one of those volunteers who show up without notice, ready to help with whatever project needs done. On a recent Thursday afternoon, she and Father Earl chinked the women's cabin.

With so many people helping out by volunteering and donating money, "I'm lucky to be one of the regulars," Rick Kurzendoerfer says.

A recent high school graduate, Rick intends to pursue a degree in psychology and make a career of counseling mentally handicapped persons and their families.

The weeks at camp can grow hot and tiring, Rick says, but all of the sweat comes drenched in satisfaction. Campers don't put any stock in money or special clothes, he says. "They just want your friendship."

The Newburgh resident compares his experiences at camp to catching his first fish.

"You'll forget the trig. You'll forget the calc. But you'll never forget catching that first fish," he says.

Angie Van Ness, too, accepts payment primarily in gratification. "The land itself is really pretty and the campers, when they come, they bring so much more to it," she says.

The third counselor is Richard Shafer, who became familiar with camp while attending college in Saint Meinrad, about six miles away.

Campers report to Anderson Woods Monday morning and leave after an awards ceremony Thursday afternoon. The counselors generally spend Thursday evening together before heading home — all of them have weekend jobs — on Friday. By Sunday night they return to camp, process the previous week and learn what they can about the next group of campers from their applications.

“The responsibility they accept is absolutely awesome,” says Colby, who described the counselors the day before the first week of camp as “absolutely, fantastically great.” She quickly noted, however, that the camp would cease to run without other volunteers.

For a month of weekends before camp starts each June, teenagers in youth groups and adults in service organizations visit Anderson Woods to clear the trails, air out the cabins, wash all the utensils in the kitchen and dining room, and do anything else that needs doing.

“Our youth groups, they’re our support in the spring. I don’t know what we’d do without them,” Colby said one Saturday in mid-May as a group of young volunteers from Corpus Christi Church in Evansville worked on a fence for a llama pen. Under the direction of youth leader Charles Koressel, other group members made repairs to the outdoor showers.

Corpus Christi Church also has a special collection for Anderson Woods each year. Knights of Columbus from Boonville show up each spring to add a new section of deck to one of the cabins. Boy scouts from Holy Family parish in Jasper also help out regularly.

“People have come from everywhere to help. It’s just been marvelous,” says Colby.

Angie Van Ness and Rick Kurzendoerfer work side-by-side with seven campers, planting red geraniums near the entrance to the dining room. Stooping on the ground in the morning sun, Angie guides Michael Will as he takes a flower from a confining plastic container and positions it in the earth.

As he gently places two scoops of black potting soil around the roots, the couple’s conversation turns to their ages.

Michael is 40.

In an environment where campers can range in age from 18 to 80, and all participate equally in activities, age is rarely an issue.

But now, the only time all week, the difference in their ages comes into focus for Angie. “You’re 40? Wow, I’m half that.”

When she was about Michael’s age, Judy Colby dreamed of running away from it all and retreating to a log cabin. But she had no cabin to run to. Instead, she had six children to rear on her own and a new insurance business to get on its feet.

When she shared her dream with friend Father Earl Rohleder, he dreamed right along with her, saying he could use the same property as a get-away for doing his sculpting.

The two often joked about their unrealistic plans.

In 1975, while appraising bulldozers in an old barn in Cynthiana, Colby came across a pile of rough-hewn logs for sale. Perfect for a cabin, she thought.

“I don’t have any place to put them. I don’t have any land,” she remembers telling the owner.

The owner said he could hold them for her for up to a year.

When Colby called Father Earl to tell him she had found logs for a cabin, he had news for her: That same day he had come across an old barn in Perry County where he could do his sculpting.

The barn sat on 65 acres for sale along the Anderson River.

The farm got Colby’s attention, but she couldn’t possibly pay for more than four acres of property. The owner informed her he had tax problems, so he couldn’t accept the money right then anyway.

A year later, Judy married Dave Colby, also an insurance agent. Not sure how he would react, she told him she wanted to use part of their new property to start a camp for handicapped adults.

The father of two sons with muscular dystrophy, he loved the idea.

Within two weeks, another 100 acres of adjacent property became available, enough to ensure a large pasture for animals and a small lake for fishing.

A few months after that, two friends from Evansville — Charles Koressel and Bob Stephens — approached the Colbys and asked if they could buy 12 acres from them. The two men wanted to start a camp for handicapped adults.

>From that collaboration grew the first board of directors of Anderson Woods, Inc., a non-profit organization established in 1978.

Elizabeth is a woolly, 4-month-old brown and cream-colored lamb. Approaching the corral with a scoop of ground corn, Anna Clark calls out the lamb’s name.

Elizabeth comes running from the herd. Small enough to crawl under the bottom rung of the wooden fence, she nearly tackles her source of food.

Several campers watch intently as Anna caresses and feeds the friendly animal.

“You want to pet her, Shannon?” Anna asks the camper nearest her.

Shannon Mahoney shakes her head.

"She's really soft," Anna says as Elizabeth eats up both the corn and the attention.

Fingers outstretched, Shannon inches toward the lamb.

Anderson Woods resolved from the onset not to accept federal or state funding.

State licensing would allow the organization to have more residents in their homes and would make them eligible for Medicaid reimbursement, but along with that would come more paperwork and a more restricted environment for campers and residents.

"We feel that the accompanying regulations are contrary to the true needs and well-being of handicapped persons," says Colby.

Sister Beata, who never got used to seeing her former students in nursing homes within 10 or 15 years of leaving her classroom, concurs.

"I was interested in having them not go to nursing homes or institutions, so I was interested in starting homes for the handicapped 15 years before we did it," says Sister Beata, who serves as house parent at Lark House in Siberia. By limiting the number of residents in each home to four, each person can be responsible for specific household chores, she says. "We live as a family."

Before Anderson Woods opened its first residential homes in Siberia, one on either side of St. Martin of Tours Catholic Church, Colby and Sister Beata addressed the parish. They let the parishioners know that they wanted to move into the two available houses, but that they wouldn't if the parish didn't want them there.

"The whole parish was all positive. It was just beautiful," says Sister Beata. "It's a community where they really have been accepted. They feel part of the community."

Residents of the two houses work in a food pantry in the community hall on Saturdays. A couple of the residents serve at Sunday mass. Both houses collaborate to run a hamburger booth and bus tables during the parish ham shoot each November.

"They are serving the larger community that way, and it really makes them feel good," Sister Beata says. Unfortunately, she believes, the acceptance her "family" has found in Siberia is the exception more than the rule. Handicapped persons might be more visible now than when she started teaching special education in 1958, "but as far as the acceptance, I'm not sure that there's total acceptance for the handicapped, because they need a lot of supervision, a lot more understanding." Sister Beata and Colby believe that understanding is easier found in small groups in small communities than at large institutions with impersonal staffs and few visitors.

For that reason, Anderson Woods asks its house parents to commit to the role for at least three years. The average turnover of shiftworkers at institutions for the mentally handicapped, according to Colby, is every five months.

And although operating the house in Bloomington costs more than operating the house in Siberia, running the residential homes still is more cost-effective than institutions. The average cost for room and board in a state institution is \$64,000 a year, or more than \$5,000 a month, according to Colby.

A resident at Owl House in Bloomington pays \$1,017 a month. In Siberia, room and board averages \$928 a month.

Another difference between institutions and these residential homes is that the residential homes do not keep waiting lists; despite the order in which interested persons might inquire about the home, the ones to be admitted first will be those most compatible with existing residents.

After a successful 90-day trial period, Anderson Woods will contract to keep a resident forever. The resident still may choose to leave at any time.

If residents become of an age or ability that they can't be cared for in the home, their guardians can place them in a nursing home, "or we would put them in the best place we could and continue to treat them as family members," Colby says.

With the camp routine and the daily course at residential homes well established, Anderson Woods recently started down a couple of new roads. One is working with groups in Kentucky and Ohio interested in becoming satellites. Those groups eventually will use the Anderson Woods training center in Siberia, where house parents go through two months of training and spend about 60 hours in a classroom learning about subjects as diverse as philosophy, nutrition, safety, law, accounting, home repairs and time and behavior management.

Another new road means offering a week of camp for handicapped children at the beginning of summer, before the adult camps start. A few days away from their parents encourages children to do things for themselves and also exposes them to more opportunities than they are likely to get at home, Colby explains.

And finally, Anderson Woods' latest goal includes opening two more residential homes a year. Toward that end, the organization will kick off its first capital campaign Aug. 1.

Board members hope to raise \$600,000 within a year.

"We see a need to open more homes, and we also see a need to assist ones who can't (pay) the full

load. It's always been my desire to take ones who need help," says Colby. She anticipates opening additional homes in Bloomington, Tell City, Evansville and Owensboro.

"We've been here long enough to know what we're doing works, and we want to do more of it," she says.