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Camp Paivika celebrates its 60-year anniversary

by Glenn Barr

Harry S Truman was president, Jackie Robinson broke the color line in major-league baseball, the transistor and the microwave oven were invented and, in the San Bernardino Mountains, Camp Paivika opened for the first time.

Six decades of history flooded back at the Crestline campsite Saturday as hundreds of camping alumni, financial supporters and ex-staffers joined current campers to celebrate the 60th anniversary of one of America's first camps for people with disabilities.



Assemblyman Anthony Adams (left) presents a certificate to AbilityFirst President Lori Gangemi and Camp Director Kelly Kunsek. Other photos show varied activities during Camp Paivika's 60th anniversary celebration Saturday (Photos by Glenn Barr)

Please see **Paivika** page A8



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Paivika from page A1

Three generations of "Paivikans" enjoyed a barbecue lunch and swapped memories under the trees while campers enjoyed a carnival featuring a dunking booth, face painting, a bounce house and games.

The day's focus wasn't all on the past, though; camp officials also dedicated new facilities, including the Joan Mier Lodge, an expanded Marilyn Graves Health Center and the 32-bed cabin #5 and its Mary Patricia Longo Living Room.

Assemblyman Anthony Adams also visited and, in an impromptu ceremony in front of the dunking booth, gave camp officials a congratulatory certificate. A group of Willow Woods quilt makers presented a colorful quilt to the camp, commemorating its history.

Three people with Camp Paivika roots shared with *The Alpenhorn News* their memories of the camp and its impact on their lives.

Paul and Carol Ann Flora, of Sylmar, met at the camp in 1960, when they were 14 and 13, and "hit it off right away." Between summers, Paul Flora said, they exchanged letters. Visits were a

challenge, because Paul, a polio victim, lived in the San Fernando Valley while Carol Ann, who has cerebral palsy, lived in Pico Rivera.

Their parents arranged weekend visits at each other's homes, he said. Later, Carol Ann "pushed" him through San Fernando Valley State College (now Cal State Northridge). Now retired, he worked primarily as a worker's compensation investigator.

They married in 1968, two years after Carol Ann got her driver's license and increased independence. Their first child, Heather, was born, without physical disabilities, in 1984, and is now expecting a child after she and her husband served in the military in Iraq. In 1989 the Floras adopted baby Shelley, who at seven was diagnosed with a form of autism. Shelley, 18, attends Camp Paivika each year.

"Our roots of living independently were here at the camp," Paul Flora said. "We owe our present life to Camp Paivika and the people who support it."

Staff alumnus Chuck Rohe came from Washington, D.C. to the event. Rohe started working at the camp at 14, in 1963, as a dishwasher. In following summers he was a maintenance

worker and assistant cook, before becoming a counselor at 18, the minimum age for that job.

After college he came back, in 1970, filling a job opening created by a mumps epidemic raging through the camp.

"In retrospect maybe I should have been concerned," Rohe said of the epidemic, "but at the time it didn't seem important to me."

Rohe, an attorney, said he contacted camp Director Kelly Kunsek seven years ago and offered to create a camp Web site. His suggestion accepted, he started gathering old photos and history, compiling what he said was a pretty basic site. It debuted in 2000.

The site proved useful in 2003, giving daily updates on the Old Fire, monitored by camp alumni nationwide. About 150 former campers and staffers are on the site, with descriptions of their camp experiences and photos. The site even has a page on Santa's Village, a favorite destination for camp outings years ago. To open it go to www.paivika.com.

Rohe said he found difficulty acquiring historical information. He then learned that many 1950s camp counselors were young Mennonite church members, and two large boxes of their letters

home and reports to the church were available in Goshen, Indiana. He went there last summer and copied the materials, which he said he will post on the site.

Camp Paivika, founded in 1947 on 12 acres of U.S. Forest Service land by what was then known as the Crippled Children's Society, got its name in a contest among campers. "Paivika" means "dawn" in the Cahuilla Native American tongue. In 1999 the Society was renamed AbilityFirst.

Each summer, from 52 to 72 campers attend eight sessions at Camp Paivika, beginning in mid-June. Winter camps are also held on weekends from February through April. Campers have disabilities including autism, cerebral palsy, epilepsy, Down syndrome, mental retardation and other neurological impairments.

The \$150-a-day cost is covered by camperships as well as money from fund-raising events, contributions and the United Way, said Lori Gangemi, president of AbilityFirst. The camp provides a full range of traditional camping activities, including horseback riding, archery, swimming, cookouts, arts and crafts and nature activities, all geared to each camper's abilities.