

FEATURE

CAMPING AT THE INTERSECTION BETWEEN THE DEAF AND HEARING WORLDS

By Jenn Legg

"You hearing or deaf?" is a common question for children of deaf adults (codas)—and, often, a difficult question to answer. The answer requires codas to weigh the importance of language skill, cultural knowledge and hearing status in their reply. Codas are hearing children who have deaf parents, and typically have access to both hearing and deaf worlds. They are not 100% deaf, nor 100% hearing, but they are individuals who frequently operate at the intersection between deaf and hearing.

In my role as director of the Kids of Deaf Adults (KODA) Camp program at Camp Mark Seven in Old Forge, N.Y., for seven years, I've witnessed the difficulty these bilingual and bicultural children encounter in accessing resources and receiving support.

As a child of deaf parents, I had no sense of my bicultural/bilingual identity whatsoever. It wasn't until my family attended the 2000 NAD conference in Norfolk, Va., that my experiences were validated. I attended Coda

Tom Bull's presentation, *Deaf Family Issues: CODAS and Identity*, and finally had a name for what I was: a Coda. More importantly, there were people just like me with similar experiences that I could connect to. I learned about the KODA Camp program and knew it was exactly what I needed. I quickly rearranged my plans the following summer—and I haven't left since.

The KODA Camp program at Camp Mark Seven began in 1997 as a one-week program with 16 campers. Today, there are two two-week sessions serving over 150 campers annually. Campers are divided into a youth session (ages 13-16) and a children session (ages 9-12). A number



Koda youth enjoy the waterfront at Camp Mark 7. Other water activities include tubing and canoeing.

of other koda camps have also sprung up across the country.

KODA Camp features traditional camp activities like arts and crafts, swimming, sports, and games. It also serves as a place for campers to explore their bicultural/bilingual identity while surrounded by peers with similar experiences. The programming is specifically designed to tackle subjects tailored to that particular age group. By providing an environment of shared experiences, campers can see themselves in others, develop a deeper understanding of culture and language, and experience personal growth and increased self-esteem. Through shared stories, campers engage educational and recreational activities designed to facilitate self-exploration, pride and personal growth, as well as a sense of community. Deaf history and cultural information are intentionally embedded throughout the session in an effort to counter any disparity in knowledge.

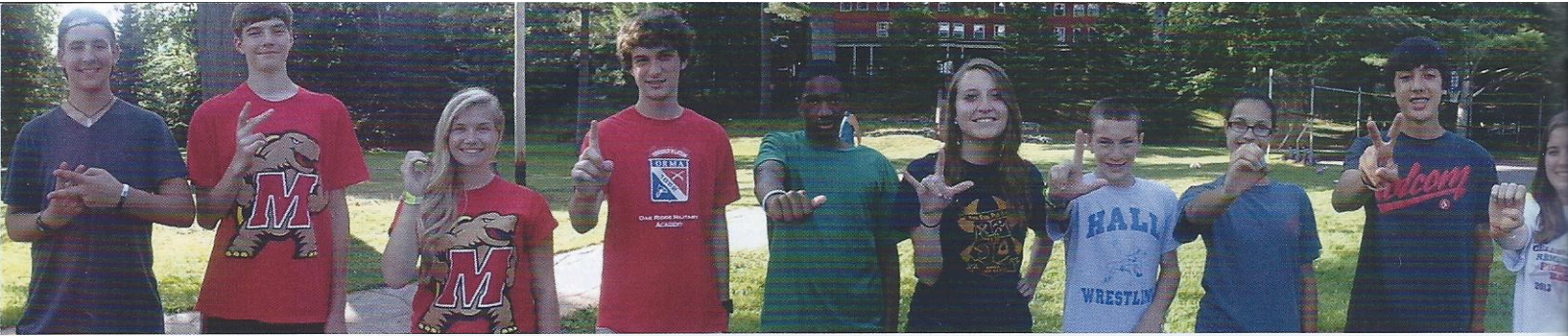
Whenever possible, presenters expand on these topics through meaningful activities encouraging campers to experiment and play with language as they learn more about ASL and English

structures and forms. It is a place where campers are comfortable describing the conflict they experience amongst hearing and deaf people surrounding language and cultural identity. With no road map for navigating these experiences, KODA Camp provides kids with the tools to build that map for themselves.

Creating a physical space for the exploration of an intersectional experience is important for c/kodas of all ages. C/kodas often describe the tension they experience growing up in two worlds and the struggles of feeling different from hearing peers and family members. Often, these identity conflicts go unresolved. Because of their hearing status, people assume they will assimilate into hearing society easily, and they are often overlooked in terms of resources and support. At KODA



Teams of koda children get pumped up for an game of Streets and Alleys.



Using the hashtag commonly seen on Twitter, Koda campers from the youth session spell out a common phrase used to describe their unique bond: “#kodalove.”

Camp, the goal is to identify those conflicts early on, empowering campers to create a positive bicultural/bilingual self-identity.

These efforts are not meant to absolve c/kodas of their hearing privilege. Rather, the goal is to provide campers the opportunity to identify and navigate their positions amongst and between hearing and deaf people. They are often confronted with competing linguistic and cultural frames surrounding language use and identity. The camp provides a safe place in which campers can begin to examine these conflicts with their peers and develop strategies for how to navigate these interactions more effectively.

The c/koda experience exists on the cusp of hearing and deaf communities. While children and adults may at times move within and between both worlds, their position is frequently at the intersection of where these groups meet. KODA Camp works to provide campers with the skills and

knowledge to identify and resolve the tension that arises and to discuss language choices and identity. ■

Jenn Legg has served as program director at Camp Mark Seven KODA Camp for 10 years. The oldest of three hearing children with Deaf parents, she is a certified interpreter in the Washington, D.C. area.



For more information about KODA Camp, visit www.campmark7.org, or email kodacamp@gmail.com.

