

Echo Hill Ranch: Family-owned camp provides kids with comfortable environment, life lessons

By Rachel Gross

Echo Hill Ranch gives Jewish children summers filled with fun, friends and life lessons. Entering its 58th summer, it will continue to instill the values of tikkun olam, kindness, teamwork and self-reliance.

Located in Medina, Texas, northwest of San Antonio, Echo Hill was founded by Houston residents Tom and Minnie Friedman in 1953. It began that summer with 38 campers and 10 staff members. Today, it is jointly owned by children Kinky, Roger and Marcie. Roger and his wife, Roz Beroza, have been co-directors since 2003 and continue to keep the child-centered, non-competitive camp thriving each year.

Echo Hill now has 125 campers and 65 staff members each session; about 60 percent of those are second-generation, while 30 percent are third-generation. Campers range in age from 6 to 16 and come from across Texas, Louisiana, Florida, Maryland, Georgia, California, Mexico, Europe and Israel. Camp this summer runs from June 23 to July 20 with one-, three- and four-week sessions available.

Roger said he and Roz are instrumental in all aspects of the camp; what sets them apart is the personal attention they give to campers.

“My job is to try and infuse the values of Echo Hill to campers and counselors,” he said. “We focus on teamwork and how to help kids resolve the many challenges of bunkhouse life away from home. We also stress the importance of ecology, tikkun olam and enjoying the special connection to nature that you get living on a hill country ranch for the summer. Campers must work out relationships in their bunk, find their role in the larger camp community, develop a deeper sense of self-reliance, and learn to rely on adult mentors and peers when in need of guidance. Succeeding in mastering these challenges contributes to increased self-confidence, resilience and social skills that are useful throughout a child’s life. These are values we talk about all the time with staff and implement in every aspect of the camp program.”

Echo Hill is the only family-owned camp in Texas that serves the Jewish community and also welcomes families of other backgrounds. Campers celebrate Shabbat each week with a candlelighting and camper-led services; in the camp’s kosher-style kitchen, they bake chal-



Photo: Courtesy of Roger Friedman

Roger Friedman and Roz Beroza with their three children in 2007: (bottom row, l-r) Amanda, Roz and Michaela; (top row) Roger and David

lah for Friday night meals. Israeli folk dancing and folk songs play a part in the outdoor Friday night services. The camp fosters a special sense of community on Friday nights because Jewish and non-Jewish campers join together in leading and participating in all aspects of the meal, prayers and services.

Echo Hill offers traditional camp activities such as: horseback riding on their own string of horses, swimming in running freshwater streams, archery, nature study and fossil hunting, backpacking into the camp’s rustic canyons and hills,

pottery on a wheel and creative ceramics taught by local hill country potters, basketball, softball, volleyball, tennis, soccer, astronomy, chess and more. Tutoring for bar and bat mitzvah preparation and to improve math and reading skills are available as well.

The Friedmans are committed to giving children an experience they will never forget and friendships that can last a lifetime. Roger added that Echo Hill is different from many camps in that it doesn’t focus on skill building in a special activity area or on religious observance,

but on the individual development of children in an away-from-home group living situation.

Roger said his background as a practicing psychologist and his wife’s experience as a clinical social worker give them a professional background in working with kids and groups that is unusual even among experienced camp owners and directors.

“We take a lot of personal pride in the quality of our camp, and we think of it as a community and as a family. We relate to parents as partners,” Friedman said. “We think of this as a personal expression of our values as parents. The kinds of families that love Echo Hill are ones that share our values about the importance of summer camping and helping kids get some time away from the competitive pressures of today’s urban life.”

Roger and Roz live in the Washington, D.C. area and spend their summers at the ranch. Friedman practices clinical psychology in Silver Spring, Md. and is an adjunct faculty member at the University of Maryland School of Social Work. Beroza is a clinical social worker and has a private practice in family and individual therapy.

Co-director Roz said she and Roger divide their camp responsibilities and work together so everything runs smoothly. She added that Echo Hill allows campers to feel comfortable and express themselves.

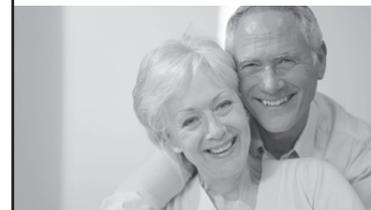
“It’s like the feeling you have when you go to a mom-and-pop grocery store. If there is a question,

the people that own and operate the program are right there,” she said. “We are small and try hard to be inclusive and allow kids to appreciate differences. Kids come to camp and it doesn’t matter what’s going on in school or at home. Camp is a time when they can leave constraints at home, find new parts of themselves and experience themselves in a different way.”

Another unique aspect is that many of the staff members are former campers and many current campers come with their siblings or cousins. In 2009, there were 19 sets of siblings at Echo Hill.

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D'var Torah

Tragedy and response

How is a Jew to react to the terrible calamity that has been unfolding before our eyes in Haiti? No doubt, we are called upon to pitch in to help alleviate the human suffering. All that most of us can do is to make a financial contribution, and that should be done to the best of our ability. A very small number can actually take part in rescue efforts, and we are of course proud that among the most effective is a team from Israel.

But what do these events do to us inside? What should we be feeling? Is anything to be learned? According to the Bible and our tradition, God is to be found in history, and He is the Power behind the entire natural world. Shall we then blame Him? Shall we cry out and ask why He has done this to innocent human beings who have done no wrong? Does our sense of divine justice necessitate that we search for some sin on the part of the victims? Must we strive to

fathom some ultimate good that may be advanced through this tragedy?

My understanding of Torah leads me in a different direction, and here I follow in the footsteps of the late Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, who taught that the proper religious response to such suffering is not to grapple with the question of why, but rather to ask: What message does it have for us, how can it transform us, what obligations does it impose upon us? Little are we to be concerned with theoretical-metaphysical questions, but rather with ethical-halachic ones. Finite man, with his partial vision, cannot uncover the absolute good in the cosmos. We cannot discern the divine plan, and we are not called upon to do so. Instead, we are to see ourselves not as objects of a fate that God has imposed upon us, but rather as subjects

who are charged with taking our destiny into our own hands.

This brings us to the first chapter of the Book of Genesis. God put man on this planet and commanded him: "Be fertile and increase, fill the earth and master it." We are called upon to subdue the environment and subject it to our control, to act as partners with the Almighty in the act of creation, to rise up in order to thwart the evil with which the natural world threatens us.

A powerful midrash states that "everything that was created in the six days of creation requires human improvement." God wants us to experience the world as imperfect and to pick up the creative work where He left it off. We must complete the world and improve it, we must perfect and rectify.

Suffering presents us with a religious challenge; the challenge

is not that we bend and accept that which the inscrutable divine will has thrown at us, but rather that we find within ourselves the strength of spirit to arise and take control in order that such cataclysmic destruction will never occur again.

To react to the earthquake with herculean rescue efforts is imperative, but does not exhaust the full meaning of the command of Genesis. A world in which such natural disasters can occur and can strike down so many people is a world whose creation has not yet been completed. It is a world in which human beings have yet to consummate the full implications of mastery over nature, a world in which we have not yet done our full part in the divine-human partnership. The disaster must impress upon us the religious imperative to innovate construction technologies which will allow the erection of earthquake-resistant buildings. Mankind must learn

to fathom the why and the wherefore of seismic movement, to develop technologies for the early detection of impending tremors. And even that is not enough. We must strive toward a more perfect world in which there simply are no earthquakes because science will discover how they may be prevented. Until such a time, we must not rest and must not be complacent. We must dream about and aspire to a safer world — which would be a more divine world — and we must urge our children to see careers in applied science and technology as avenues of deep religious significance.

And all the while, we shall pray for the speedy recovery of the suffering and grieving victims.

Rav Hanan Schlesinger is director of community education and community rabbinic scholar of the Community Kollel of Dallas, located on the Schultz-Rosenberg Campus. He can be reached at 214-789-7241.

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Roz said friendship is part of Echo Hill's mantra and is something they constantly stress to campers. Her favorite part is being able to experience camp through the eyes of the campers.

"To have a friend is to be a friend. This has been part of the Echo Hill way for a long time," Beroza said. "I did not grow up going to camp, but I am able to experience it through the kids. That's really something special to be a part of — the fact that we are providing something and can really make a difference in how kids feel about themselves. They come because they want to grow and enjoy themselves and it's just a pleasure to be a part of that."

Chuck Hart, past president of

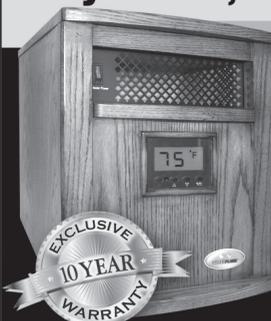
the Texas Jewish Historical Society, was a staff member when Echo Hill began and now serves as associate director. Hart met his wife, Jan, at camp; his children are alumni and his grandchildren are campers.

Hart made lifelong friends at Echo Hill and said the generational aspect provides closeness. He emphasized that camp has a lasting effect on children.

"It's hard to put a dollar value on the impact it has on them," he said. "It allows kids to make lifelong friends, and even leads to marriage. You can't put a value on it because it's something that lives with you and is something you can't forget."

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