



B.C. First Nations Head Start Cultural Family Camp: Owl Rock Family Camp-Out

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IT WAS THE SUMMER OF 2004. THE WEATHER WAS HOT AND THE KIDS WERE ALL HYPED ABOUT GOING “UP THE HILL” to the Owl Rock Camp location and “roughing it” for the next few days. I was very anxious about what would happen, but I was also intrigued by the fact that so many of us would be out there, in the wilderness, at the mercy of nature’s finest.

There were over 30 kids all packed and ready to go. The camp coordinator, Denelle Bonneau, was ready to go. We had the PIB Health van packed up with sleeping bags, bug repellent, sun screen, food, tents, cookware, toiletries, and every other knick-knack we could think of to make this outing sufficient in the way of necessities. The camp coordinator and myself would load up as many kids that could fit into the van and transport them from the community, up the 25-minute drive to the camp. We would make several trips, and other families would follow.

Once we were up at the camp, the weather didn’t feel as hot. I took comfort in knowing that there was a lake close by to indulge in. We had a majority of the group at the camp by lunch, and we started unpacking. The kids were anxious to start their exploration and tour of the site. Another camp coordinator would soon be there to accompany the children to do some exploration of the land, and it was an eye-feast for the kids. We gathered around to do some introductions, orientation, house keeping, rule-laying and discussing the agenda for the next few days.

The duration of the camp included story-telling, swimming, exploration, Okanagan language (songs, basic communication words, stick-games, role playing). When it came time to do the swimming, the kids had the most fun, from what I observed. The kids had some air-mattress races and soaked up the sun. Some indulged in doing washing up in the lake too, which was fun to watch. In the evening, when everyone was settled after supper, we had a bonfire going, and some of the camp facilitators had story-telling and sharing with the kids who

stayed up later to listen.

I couldn't stay up late, because there was so much going on during the day. It was exhausting, but fun. I rather enjoyed myself, and so did my two boys, who I brought with me to share this unforgettable experience. At one point, the boys and girls broke up into groups and did some plays for everyone. The kids got together and made berry jam, too.

I found the entire event very memorable. I highly encourage other communities to commit to doing these kinds of cultural activities. It brings families closer together. It builds socializing among community members, and educates the children about the land and how they can have fun outdoors, without the electronic games and the internet or television. Having the children use their imagination was the best. Having the children do the plays for everyone was so entertaining and inviting for everyone involved. The stick games were also a hit with the kids and parents. I enjoyed watching the parents and children interact more and share the valuable knowledge that the camp facilitators had to share as a part of the cultural aspect of the camp.

Our coordinators for this camp were all very culturally knowledgeable and are fluent speakers in the Okanagan language. They spoke so highly of our cultural ways and it really inspired the children. Children who weren't sociable, or who were shy, came out of their shell and were the "talkers" in the group. They were like sponges—they wanted more of what they were learning and it was good to see that in our children. They were intrigued by nature, and were awed by the stories of our past generations, who explored this part of the land so many years ago. By not having television, telephones, cell phones, internet, business agendas, meetings, hectic schedules and chaos in the town/city, it was a nice change.

I look forward to the next cultural camp this summer (2005). We may have more children involved and more families participating in this wonderful experience. It may be my last year being involved as a coordinator's assistant, but it won't be my last year participating in this cultural camp that is crucial in our way of life and traditions.

By incorporating the Okanagan language and legends (story-telling) into these activities, our children are absorbing this as a part of their teachings and will never forget this experience. They will take this with them, wherever they go, and learn new things and use those tools in their future endeavors, as they become more involved in our cultural education.

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Camps are two or three days long, organized in partnership with the Head Start program, National Child Benefit program, and Brighter Futures funding. Resource persons (sweats, hunting, language) are provided by a local co-op of traditional speakers and teachers. Several programs and staff work together to create a healthy, safe and traditional experience for all families.