

CAMPOWERMENT

rehab for the
mind, body and soul

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Oh, the irony!"

—Dawn Andrews, life coach

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY JAN SCHRODER

I WAS NEVER A HAPPY CAMPER. Memories of my two short stints at Camp Mikell in northeast Georgia include being the pudgiest person in my cabin and a counselor yelling at me for cleaning up too slowly.

But those sour memories have been replaced by those of bonding with my bunkmates, eating spiked gummy worms, drinking Pinky Swears and watching the sunset from a paddleboat. I learned what "Color Wars" are, and cheered for women clad in shaving cream-covered shower caps having Cheetos tossed at their heads before jumping into a baby pool filled with Jell-O. I experienced all this and more during four days at Campowerment in Ocala, Florida, a sleep-away camp for women.

But in the midst of these unique and typical camp experiences — yes, there were also sing-alongs and s'mores — I also witnessed life-changing moments for many women and made vows for improvements in my own life. Some of this came about as the result of our interaction with health and wellness experts. Another reason for the parade of personal renaissance was the environment: I was surrounded by non-judgmental, supportive women, all of us away from the stress of our everyday lives.

The camp started as Camp Bombshell in 2005, with 17 getaways held until 2008.

"But there were no experts then," said Campowerment Founder Tammi Leader Fuller. "It was more about fun and games and running away from home and responsibilities. Campowerment started in January 2013 and we held four camps last year and have seven more in 2014, in the Catskills, Poconos, Malibu and North Florida."

The presence of the experts elevates this grown-up getaway to more than just a sleep-away camp. While their number and expertise varies, the list includes nutritionists, certified yoga instructors, productivity consultants, parenting instructors, spiritual advisors, happiness experts and business consultants.

Campers choose from activities posted on a bulletin board each morning. You can hang out by the pool or the lake, try your hand at archery or the ropes course, or participate in any of the sessions with topics such as journaling, productivity, happiness and business strategy.

Business strategist and life coach Dawn Andrews explained, "The point of camp is to do what you want when you want how you want. We need to schedule our time to be free, relaxed and off a schedule. Oh, the irony."

During one of her sessions, Dawn urged us to determine where we want to be in five years, what steps we need to take to get there and what is holding us back.

"The experts and speakers create structure and opportunity to look into bigger life questions that we rarely take time for but so desperately need to address," she said.

Education and Revelation

One of the most powerful sessions I attended was with Pat San Pedro, an Emmy winner who led a session called "Choosing Joy." Pat, like many other women who attended the October camp, is a breast cancer survivor. She's also the author of *The Cancer Dancer: Healing One Step at a Time*. She showed us a



video about her journey with the disease, which she began filming just a few hours after her diagnosis. It was a powerful illustration of making the choice to live with joy, no matter what the circumstances. She urged us to build our gratitude muscle. She said we could vent and purge when bad things happen, but warned us, “Don’t buy real estate on that land. Express it and move on.”

Productivity Consultant Wendy Ellin, who attended the October camp as an expert, said, “While I was able to spread my wisdom and help others find ways to conquer their clutter, my camper experience was one of enlightenment, revelation and self-development — and way more than I had imagined it would be.”

Campers and experts shared powerful stories about death, divorce, murder, betrayal, abuse, estrangements, fractured relationships and the inability to let go of the past. I witnessed two amazing moments, when women came to terms with issues that had plagued them for years.

Those revelations and the tears that flowed afterwards equal success for Tammi. Her happiest childhood memories were from camp, so she wanted to replicate that experience for women.

“Campowerment mixes the magic of the summer camp experience with empowering workshops led by experts, to help women re-ignite their lives,” she said. “Disconnecting from technology helps, and being in nature enhances the experience, but the life changing, ‘Aha!’ moments come from the community these women build together. Each camper takes home something different from her Campowerment weekend, but everyone leaves relaxed and recharged, with a renewed sense of appreciation and purpose.”

Until recently, Tammi was a top TV producer, handling the additional demands of running the camps with the help of her mother, Joan Leader, and her daughter, Chelsea Fuller. She just recently felt empowered enough to quit her TV job and devote herself full-time to Campowerment.

In between the tears and vows to change the parts of our lives that weren’t working, there was plenty of fun. Activities included game night, a fireside cookout and singing contest, Zumba and yoga classes, archery, “Tramp Camp” (a trampoline class), and Happy Hour by the lake every evening. Many women found courage they didn’t know they had from tackling the ropes course and zooming down the zip line. One night I listened in amazement to the spiritual medium Galit Shearouse, who brought messages to several of the campers from their dearly departed.

One of my most pleasant surprises was how much I bonded with my bunk. My chief concern before attending was how I would sleep in a room with dozens of other bunkmates and one bathroom. The answer was, surprisingly well! Logic defies that

more than two dozen women could share one bathroom with just three showers and three toilets. Yet somehow we did so with no trouble.

We varied in ages but were primarily in our 40s and 50s, with careers such as TV news producer, real estate agent, Zumba instructor and homemaker.

About the only make-up I saw the whole time was on one of my bunkmates, expert Gerilyn Lucas. She gave a hilarious talk about her diagnosis with breast cancer at age 27, wearing her signature red lipstick, and the book she wrote about it, *Why I Wore Lipstick to My Mastectomy*, which was made into a Lifetime movie. At the end of her session, a joyous dance party broke out to the song *I Will Survive*.

The Logistics

No, the digs aren’t fancy. There are no phones, and at the camp I attended there was very limited cell reception. But then again, we were there to connect the old-fashioned way. As Joan tells the women who call to inquire about the camps, “It’s not five-star accommodations. It’s a five-star experience.”

As Tammi says, “Women need a time out from their crazy busy lives, sometimes just to catch their breath, and when they are open to new experiences and given the tools to live the lives they want and deserve, they go home happier people. That’s why we keep doing this. And why the women keep coming back.”

Campers are encouraged to leave comments in journals before they leave. Here’s one of my favorite entries:

“Behind every smile there is a tear and everyone has a problem. We are here to grow, to learn, to share, to crack. Camp is so much more than color wars and laughing. It’s about finding yourself between the whipped cream and the circles.”

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For information: www.campowerment.com



The author (on left in white shirt) and some of her bunkmates at Campowerment.