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A Parent's View of CISV

By Dr. Leslie Kaplan 2008

Last July, I put my eleven year old son on a plane to Denmark in the company of three other kids and one college student from Jacksonville. He spent a month living with forty-eight other 11 year olds from 12 different countries. The boy who returned to me was different. Less shy, more mature, and with a global awareness most adults lack. He had tried strange foods from other countries. He knew how to say things in languages I don't know. He knew his way around a world map, and wanted to go to Australia more than anywhere else. For the price of a month at sleep-away camp, my son had a life-changing experience in a country I've never visited.

Children's International Summer Villages (CISV) is a fifty-year old international nonprofit, non-partisan, volunteer-run organization focused on cultural diversity, leadership and peace education, with chapters in 60 different countries. CISV is a unique program that was started in the aftermath of World War II by a child psychologist responding to a UNESCO proposal for a peace education initiative. Dr. Doris Allen felt that the route to peace was through children who are just old enough to carry their own culture and appreciate the culture of others. The program centers around summer "villages" like the one my son participated in. They are kind of like summer camp, but instead of sailing and horseback riding, the children play carefully crafted games that teach them to respect each other and appreciate their similarities and their differences.

I was nervous about sending my son abroad without me, but the more I saw of the organization, the more comfortable I became. During the three-day selection process, I was very impressed with the thorough interviews and the concern to make sure that both the parents and the children understood what they were signing up for. I was impressed with the 3-1 adult-child ratio. I learned that CISV is a volunteer organization, and that I would be asked to help support the village in Jacksonville at the same time that my son was being hosted by families in Denmark. I was impressed that many of the Jacksonville volunteers had adult children who had participated long ago, and they believed enough in the program to continue to volunteer their time.

It was a leap of faith, but happily my son's village included some technologically-savvy counselors, and so I caught glimpses of him in the video postings on the blog. When Alex returned, I understood how powerful an experience it was for him. It wasn't until I honored my commitment to volunteer, though that I understood what makes CISV so special. I have volunteered at a bunch of local CISV events, and got to see the activities up close. The "games" are tested over time, and the same database of activities is used at all CISV events. The counselors, including my son's leader are very often young adults who started in CISV as eleven year olds. Others are school teachers who return year after year. Along with committed counselors, there is a host of junior counselors who are 16-18, and have almost always been involved in CISV for a long time. Some of the

activities are about working cooperatively, like forming a “knot” of people by holding hands in a big cluster and then having to figure out how to untangle without letting go of any hands. Others are about obstacles to peace, such as “rich/poor” which is a day-long a

activity in which some kids are rich and others are poor. Everyone gets bread and water for meals, but they have to work to earn “money” for anything else. Those few who are rich can do very easy and fun work and get a lot of money, while those who are poor have to work hard and get little. After the exercise, they debrief and talk about how it felt to be rich or poor and how it felt to watch their friends in the opposite situation.

What struck me about the camp is that the leaders and even junior counselors are well-trained, often growing up in the organization. CISV promotes friendliness, mutual respect, peaceful problem-solving, and leadership. Rather than grouping together by age, the adults and teens are always scattered in among the 11 year olds, guiding them, modeling the games, and watching out for shy kids. They take their roles seriously, and after a lot of time in CISV it is quite natural, since even the 11 year olds are constantly mixed up into different groups all the time to create community and avoid cliques. I was also struck by my son’s enthusiasm. He is a video-game kid at home, but CISV is interactive activities all day long. They are careful to intersperse active and introspective activities, large and small groups. There is an arc to the month, starting with “get-to-know each other” activities and then moving to trust games, and finally the more serious “issues” activities. Watching the kids walk in as strangers and out as friends, watching them stay engaged all day in activities with no electronics, and in fact almost no material props at all, and watching them learning about important issues in a natural, playful way made me feel deeply satisfied to have found this program for my children and also proud to be a part of the organization. Children’s International Summer Villages is one of Jacksonville’s best kept secrets. There are only about 20 chapters in the entire US, and we are lucky to have had a chapter in Jacksonville since 1976.