



AT CAMP MUJIGAE is Bart Goldstein, top left, after his traumatic brain injury. Camp Mujigae has played an important role in Bart's recovery.

Why Heritage Camp?

By Joel Goldstein



SIBLINGS Bart and Cassidy Goldstein enjoying Camp Mujigae.

When our son Bart was only 3 he voiced emphatic dislike of his handsome Asian face. He wanted to “fit in” to the Caucasian world he’d known since arriving home at age 5 months. His message was loud and clear, that even at a tender age, his self-esteem was wrapped up with his adoption, Korean heritage and being a “stranger in a strange land.” We felt lucky, alerted to seek out ways to help Bart grow up feeling good about who he was, long before the teen years’ merry chase.

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Each autumn, just as they were starting back at school, we’d ask the kids, “What was the very best thing you did this year?” The answer was invariably, “Camp Mujigae!” Even when we visited Disney, or vacationed on the Maine shore, the answer was the same. It would be hard to exaggerate how much our kids love Mujigae, or the role it has played in

their lives.

For four magical days each summer, Parsons Child and Family Center in Albany is transformed into a Korean village. Pre-teens and teens sleep overnight on campus, while younger campers return home or to hotels each night. Instructors from the Korean community offer classes ranging from folktales and calligraphy to traditional fan dance and martial arts. There are social activities, like bowling, dances, karaoke and carnival. Staffed almost entirely by former campers, Mujigae is organized into six separate age groups from infants to 17-year-olds, all running simultaneously. All of it — food, facilities, dorms, instruction, entertainment and nursing care is accomplished by volunteers.

After near-sleepless days and nights of camp, our kids were so wiped out that they’d usually be asleep before the car cleared the camp

grounds. I recall arriving home and carrying 5-year-old Cassidy upstairs to her bunk bed. Stirring briefly, she whispered sweetly while drifting off, “Ah, Mujigae . . . lots of Korean kids.”

From age 10 to 15, Bart and his friends David Kennedy and Dave Rickards returned home after camp to Philadelphia with the Rickards, for what Bart liked to call a weeklong “after party.” Along with the Kennedys we’d drive down to Philly at the end of the week for a huge cookout and post-Mujigae gabfest. We’d dissect that year’s camp, and brainstorm for next season. Bart came to view Philadelphia as a home away from home.

Remarkable people visited camp. Sam Wallace was born amid the devastation of the Korean War. Undersized, sickly, suffering chronic ear infections, he was sent by the orphanage to beg on the streets of Seoul for a few badly needed won. Adopted by an American family at age 5, he had lost hearing in his left ear, and most of the use of the right and his health was so poor he was not expected to live. He thrived, going on to become a college athlete, and Master of Tang Soo Do. Training in special education, he patiently reinterpreted the moves and forms of the Korean martial art, making them accessible to students with cerebral palsy and other crippling diseases. Master Wallace’s high-flying demonstrations of Tang Soo Do amazed us, just as his life story, told round the campfire, held us rapt. A role model for campers and parents alike, his story resonates courage, resilience, decency and the possibilities of international adoption. Wallace, and other adult adoptees, too old to have enjoyed heritage camp themselves, loved helping their younger “cousins,” while perhaps laying to rest some of their own demons.

Mujigae connections go year-round. Counselors returning to Albany colleges from break would stop at our place half-way between New York City and Albany for a meal and bunk. One summer Jane Chang joined us for a Maine vacation. Her older brother James, Bart’s favorite counselor, spent several weeks at our house, completing a nearby

summer internship. Bart returned the favor, staying a week with the Changs in New York City.

By age 16, Bart’s favorite top was a “red-devil” Korean World Cup Soccer Jersey, his Korean name emblazoned across its back. Never one to be wishy-washy, he had become an overbearing Korean booster. It would be too simple to say this transformation in outlook resulted solely from Korean heritage camp. Other factors played a role, especially the arrival of his adored baby sister Cassidy. For her part Cassidy, now out of college, still considers her Mujigae buddies among her closest, most trusted friends.

Mujigae campers share a special bond, forged by years of happy camping and post-camp “hangin’ out.” Of course, not every encounter was happy. At 15, Bart, Dave Kennedy and “Rickards,” were stopped in the predominantly white suburb of Drexel Hills, Pa., by a police officer demanding to see IDs. Only Bart was carrying one, but his high school student card, which read “Bart A. Goldstein,” was not a photo-ID. The officer sharply asked Bart, “Who’s this Goldstein guy? Where’s your ID?” Bart angrily insisted that he was himself, but to no avail. Next thing you know, the boys are in the squad car, on their way to the station house on suspicion of loitering. It eventually sorted out, but the boys were plenty steamed up, and there was talk about letters to the police commissioner and mayor. In the end after thorough venting, we hoped they’d learned a sad, but necessary object lesson about racial profiling. Sharing angry, hurtful experiences only served to deepen the bonds of friendship and brotherhood forged at Mujigae.

At 16, Bart suffered a severe traumatic brain injury in a car accident, and soon found his friends moving on with their lives, leaving him alone and adrift. His journey back has been long and bitterly hard, made more bearable by the continued love and support of his Mujigae friends. As my wife Dayle wrote in an open letter to Mujigae several years after the accident: “What’s different about Mujigae friends is that they view Bart as part of themselves. They understand viscerally,

sympathetically at a moment what Bart is going through and identify. They are there for him, no matter what condition he’s in, they accept him fully and lovingly. That experience is immeasurably affirming for Bart.” Master Wallace reached out to Bart, asking him to “help out” at his summer sports camp, a gesture which gave Bart’s confidence a needed boost.

Camp sometimes runs an essay contest on the theme “What Mujigae means to me.” Parents generally speak of extended family, an accepting community where awkward explanations are not necessary. I have often gazed at the sea of happy faces at “Opening Ceremonies” thinking that any one of them might have been mine. For their part, kids focus on friends they’ve made, especially counselors, former campers who are heroes to the younger kids. “We’re finally in the majority!” comes up time and again. To paraphrase Peter Savasta, long-time counselor and co-founder of Also-Known-As, “We’re not entirely Korean or typically American. We’re unique, our own sub-culture — Korean adoptees. As long as we’re comfortable in our own skins, we’re OK.”

What makes heritage camp special is not so much cultural literacy, valuable as that is — it’s being part of a peer group throughout one’s childhood, all of whom walk in your shoes — that’s the real magic.

There is no panacea for the many challenges, doubts, hurts and jumbled feelings about racial identity involved in transracial and international adoption. But heritage camp is a safe zone where every child — happy and grateful, or angry and ungrateful, finds acceptance, mutual aid, friendship and fun.

Joel Goldstein and his wife Dayle Groudine served on Mujigae’s Camp Committee for years, eventually as director and volunteer coordinator respectively. He is author of “No Stone Unturned: A Father’s Memoir of His Son’s Encounter with Traumatic Brain Injury,” published by Potomac Books. For more information about the Goldstein family, visit www.tbibook.com. For information on Camp Mujigae, visit www.mymujigae.org, and on Facebook.