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AVALON

the DREAM issue

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PAUL NEWMAN
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Speaking out Loud

A Sense of Wonder

by Georgia Mills
photos by Lynn Christoffers



From the left, Pam Benjamin (director of Sense of Wonder Camp); Georgia; Camille; and Noah. The children display the puppets they created while at the camp.

I was nervous about my first day at Sense of Wonder Camp. The butterflies in my stomach had turned to eagles, and I was wiping beads of sweat off my forehead. Once everyone was introduced, I realized that I was not the only person who wasn't native to Martha's Vineyard where the camp takes place. There were kids from around the world, including Italy and Paris. It was a global village, happening on a tiny nine-by-twenty-three mile island, surrounded by the ocean, connecting countries and continents around the world. The camp is beautiful, highlighting arts, nature, and our environment.

Camps can range from being oriented around sports, crafts, to just about anything. Each camp offers something different for everyone and leaves you with a memory that will continue to make you smile. I was at Sense of Wonder Camp in the summertime. I remember when we would go swimming—the beach was only a thirty second walk away—and the feeling of grazing my toes across the warm sand, then dipping them into the cold water that lapped up to my ankles. I always squealed in shock. I carry that memory with me, and I wouldn't erase a single sound or smell of that moment. The way the seawater would mist and whop my face, I'll never forget it. I can still smell the salted rocks and warm July wind.

Months later, when I am writing this, I am trying to hold on to the sense of being there and not just reporting on it. I suppose that is a part of the sense of wonder: the ability to

absorb and recognize every second of the day; to appreciate the little things; the way that rain makes the grass moist and trembling; or having just enough jam left in the jar to spread across a piece of toast in the morning; getting a B on a math exam; watching the leaves dance in the wind. So many times, we expect something more of ourselves, when we should love what we have. There are many different definitions of a "sense of wonder," this is mine. What is yours?

During my stay at Sense Of Wonder Camp, director and creator Pam Benjamin agreed to do the interview shown below.

Georgia: Did starting Sense of Wonder Camp profusely change your life or your outlook on life?

Pam: Well, at the time I started the year-round program in 1991, our youngest daughter had just graduated from high school. I think I felt like a milestone had been completed and I was free to focus on a life long dream. The camp is an outcome or the culmination, extension, and blending together of many things that I love: children, creative arts, nature, animals, humanitarian causes, global awareness, peace and justice, spiritual consciousness, community service, higher goals. I have learned so much from working with young people. The work is reciprocal and they are my teachers too. I love my work and I feel very blessed to be able to do it. It is so inspiring and has broadened my awareness and sensitivity to all these concerns.

Georgia: On the day that you got the idea for Sense of Wonder camp, had you been turning it over for months or years, or was it a burst of inspiration in the moment?

Pam: I guess you might say that it had been brewing a little bit at a time for my whole life.

Georgia: Would there be anything that you would want to change in the camp over the years?

Pam: There is nothing I'd change or alter the course of, but I would love to have it expand more, to other areas of the world. I love the idea of any of the past campers or counselors creating a branch somewhere else or using the ideas in the work they do—wherever or whatever it may be. I think that it cannot help from happening as the Sense of Wonder young people learn and become more aware.

Georgia: Has the overall establishment of the camp been any different from how you first imagined it? If so, how?

Pam: It has really been something that has evolved, grown, and expanded each year. I am so grateful for the beautiful studio that we have now. The camp started out in my husband's old boat-building shop and the space was not as open it is now. So that is something I had not imagined when first starting out. My thought was open and hopeful but, of course, I did not know for sure that the ideas would be so well received and that someday we would have so many young people participating and



The left photo pictures guest instructor Shyla Nelson of Good Earth Singers with campers and one of the counselors; in the center, naturalist Gus Ben David with his incredible critters; and in the right photo is master puppeteer Dan Butterworth.

have this beautiful space.

Georgia: What are the benefits of having the camp in your backyard and near your studio?

Pam: That's an interesting question. It is a very short commute to work. The grounds and the studio are an extension of our home life so I am always here and have access to it and think about it. It's convenient when I am working on or getting ready for a project and it's taking a long time to complete. I am not too far from home, and so it really imitates life when I think about it. Sense of Wonder creations are really not too far from what I think about every day.

Georgia: Starting up any long-term project is stressful and sometimes terrifying, was there any point where it was a possibility that the camp wouldn't survive?

Pam: I spend a certain amount of time each day on my spiritual study so when I was starting out, that is what I relied on to guide me to know what and how to put together all the parts to create a program that works. There was a lot of prayer involved and that continues to happen and be a large part of the preparation and implementation of the program and activities.

Georgia: Do you consider the counselors at Sense of Wonder to be teachers, teaching the kids as you do? Or are they considered pupils?

Pam: I guess you might say they are a little of

both, just like I am a teacher and a student. I share what I know and also learn so much from the students. I've been working with young people for about forty years now so I have more experience and knowledge about what we are doing and about the logistics than everyone else involved does. So I pass on the knowledge of "how to do it" to the counselors and they in turn pass it on to the campers. As far as unique and individual talents go, the counselors express those all by themselves. We have had so many talented counselors and visiting artists over the years. Beautiful artists, singer-songwriters, poets, actors, puppeteers, writers, humanitarians, and environmentalists.

Georgia: If you weren't running the camp, where would you live, what would you be doing?

Pam: This is a question that I really cannot answer because the Sense of Wonder program is so inextricably part of who I am now and what my life is about. I hope to be doing it for the rest of my life because I really cannot imagine what I would be doing without it.

Georgia: What is your favorite aspect of the camp?

Pam: I really love everything about the camp. If I had to pick one thing that I love a little more than the others, it would be having heart-to-heart talks with everyone at our circle time, when I see little lights going on in

the faces of the campers and counselors when we are talking about something that is close to their hearts. ❖

Go to www.senseofwondercreations.org to find out more about Sense of Wonder.

Epilogue

Hi Georgia!

Thank you so much for being such a great camper and contributing so much to everything that is going on here at Sense of Wonder camp. We loved having you. And thank you for sending me these questions to answer. Answering them helped me think about and put into words what I do.

Hope you are having a great day.

Love,

Pam





“When I was a kid, camp was a place where I could hike, fish, meet new friends, and raise a little hell. And it was that simple idea that started Hole in the Wall Camps, to get kids suffering from serious medical conditions out of their hospital beds and let them be kids again.”

– Paul Newman, Actor and Philanthropist

Founded by Paul Newman, the **Association of Hole in the Wall Camps** is a growing global network of camps and programs that provide life-changing experiences to children with serious illnesses, always free of charge. Through 28 initiatives throughout the world, the network has served over 337,500 children and their families from 50 countries. Learn more at www.holeinthewallcamps.org.

Newman’s Own Foundation is committed to carrying on the philanthropic legacy of Paul Newman by turning all profits and royalties from the sale of Newman’s Own food products into charitable donations. Paul Newman and Newman’s Own Foundation have together given over \$300 million to thousands of charities around the world. For more information, visit www.newmansownfoundation.org.

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