

Girl Scout camps: On my honor I will try to save them

Some days, I scratch my head and wonder where the world is going. I'm doing a lot of that these days as I watch the Girl Scouts of North East Ohio, claiming poverty, try to close and sell five of their seven camps. I'm backing the grassroots protesters who are fighting this.

The GSNEO also wants to delete the word "camp" and re-christen these places "Premier Leadership Centers," a vapid phrase that sounds like a tawdry for-profit college, not an outpost deep in the woods with platform tents, fire circles and outhouses — but wait: They want to scrap the outhouses, too.

It was bad enough years ago when the fussy ladies in charge of Girl Scouts here banned night hikes at camp ("unsafe," they said.) Now they want to clamp down on camping. How sad.

I was a Girl Scout when I was young. Wasn't everybody? I went to Brownie day camp at the North Chagrin Reservation's Strawberry Lane and to Camp Julia Crowell in Peninsula for two weeks as a Girl Scout.

At Julia Crowell, I slept in a tent with three other girls. I walked up a little hill to the outhouse. I brushed my teeth at an outdoor sink. I learned to row a boat and to sing new songs. When it stormed one night, my tent mates and I had to scurry to unroll the flaps on our tent to stay dry. On the last night, after dark, we lit fat candles on small pieces of wood and sent them floating out into the lake. We sat on shore and watched the flickering flames drift silently across the water. It was beautiful.

Perhaps it was no surprise, then, that when my daughter's fourth-grade troop needed a leader, I volunteered. I had more fun as a leader than I ever did as a Girl Scout. The highlights of our year were not World Friendship program or cookie sales, but the weekends we went camping. We planned these outings months in advance because space at the camps filled quickly.

In the winter, we'd stay inside a cabin with electricity and a gas stove, but not always indoor plumbing. It didn't matter. We'd hike and build snowmen, then come inside and make crafts and cook



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and play charades. After dark, we'd roast marshmallows. One year, the girls learned to cross-country ski. During one January campout, the temperature tumbled below zero, but we used the latrines outside with nary a thought.

We were old hands at ice and cold. When we camped in mid-October one year, it snowed. The sixth-grade girls cooked spaghetti over a fire and wrapped themselves up in their sleeping bags in their tents at night. They used an outhouse, too.

Now, years later, those troop members are in their mid-30s. Most have husbands and children, perhaps little Brownies of their own. But I have a hunch they still remember Girl Scout camping. Camping is what Scouts was all about. Oh, there were World Friendship programs and badges and cookie sales, but we used our cookie sale profits to go to camp. The girls loved it, and so did I.

No other organization offers the camping that Girl Scouts do. Yet I can't see how 40,000 girls and 14,000 adult leaders in the GSNEO can jam into just two camps in their 15 counties, which spread like melting butter from Ashtabula County south to Carroll County and west to Lorain County.

As I write this, my grandson and his daddy are finishing a little wooden racecar for his Cub Scout Pinewood Derby. I haven't heard the Boy Scouts talk about closing camps. Only the Girl Scouts. If it's a financial decision, cut something else, not the heart and soul of the program.

Our world is suffocating under smartphones, the Internet, iPads, iPods and other electronic fluff. Girl Scout camps pluck girls out of that and dunk them back into reality, where they learn to cook over a fire, use an outhouse and giggle with their friends. Without that, why be a Girl Scout?

I wonder, sadly, what camp curmudgeon has snatched control of the GSNEO front office and made this nutty decision. Maybe she — or they — needs to take a break, and go camping.

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