



## *A Maine Camp for Deaf Children Carries On After an Unthinkable Loss*

Joshua Seal, a Deaf man killed in a mass shooting last fall, did not get to see the third season of the camp he started. But 22 Deaf or hard-of-hearing children did, including his own.

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**By Jenna Russell** Photographs and Video by Chad Unger

Reporting from Rome, Maine

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As the three girls drew closer to their Maine summer camp one morning in August, text messages pinged between their separate cars as they tracked each other's progress toward their destination.

Maya Fitts, 16, reported that she was only 17 minutes away. Autumn Laughlin, 11, chimed in; her E.T.A. was almost exactly the same. Soon they would turn onto a dirt road that led through a forest of tall pines, rolling slowly down a steep hill until the shining surface of North Pond popped into view. The third friend, Ingrid Hagenbuch, 11, was delayed by a stop to buy a bathing suit.

They had looked forward to this reunion since last August, and every minute mattered. Their weeklong overnight camp in Rome, Maine, Pine Tree Camp's Dirigo Experience, is the only one in the state exclusively for children who are Deaf or hard of hearing. For some of the 22 campers from around the state — many of whom are the only Deaf or hard-of-hearing students in their small rural schools — it would be the only time all year they spent with peers who were like them in this way.

"I'm finally home," said Jayson Seal, 13, describing how he felt when he arrived. Like several other people interviewed for this article, he spoke through an American Sign Language interpreter.



Pine Tree Camp's Dirigo Experience is the only camp in Maine exclusively for children who are Deaf or hard of hearing.

His father, Joshua Seal, created the Dirigo Experience two years ago, determined to provide his four young children, and others across Maine, with an experience he never had as a Deaf child growing up there: a traditional summer camp adventure alongside Deaf and hard-of-hearing peers. The name comes from Maine's state motto, Latin for "I lead."

Mr. Seal was supposed to be at camp this August, signing an exuberant welcome as campers emerged from their cars and darting around to ensure each one settled in.

But he did not get to see the third season of the camp he started. Mr. Seal was among the 18 people killed in Lewiston, Maine, on Oct. 25 of last year, when a gunman opened fire at a bar and a bowling alley. Mr. Seal, who was 36, was at the bar that night, playing in a weekly cornhole league with a group of Deaf friends. Four of them were killed, devastating Maine's small Deaf community.

As the head of interpreter services for Pine Tree Society, a nonprofit that supports Maine residents with disabilities, Mr. Seal had become well known in the state during the coronavirus pandemic, interpreting in American Sign Language at news conferences held by Gov. Janet Mills. His dream of creating a camp was made possible by his ties to Pine Tree, which owned the property in Rome and had a long history of running outdoor programs for Maine children and adults with disabilities.

Kevin Bohlin, a close friend of Mr. Seal who had partnered with him to start the camp, recalled that even in his shock and grief last fall, he was determined to make sure the camp endured.



At camp, children tie-dyed T-shirts, ran wild during a scavenger hunt, steered a pontoon boat toward an eagle's nest and debated the merits of tater tots at lunch.



Fionn McLoughlin, a seventh grader, said he had shed some tears after lights out, when unwanted thoughts of zombies crowded in.



Campers ranged in age 6 to 16.

“My first thought was, ‘Camp’s still on,’” said Mr. Bohlin, who is also Deaf, signing as he sat near North Pond one afternoon. “It was Josh’s dream, but it’s not about me or Josh. It’s about the kids who need it.”

On the nights last winter when the loss felt overwhelming — when Mr. Bohlin stopped to ask his absent friend, “C’mon, man, why’d this have to happen?” — he persisted, pushing through the paperwork and planning so that Maya and her friends, and Mr. Seal’s own children, could return to the same safe haven they had found last summer.

None of them had ever fathomed having to return to camp without him. But as summer waned, and leaves at the tops of trees in Maine flared red, signaling the approach of fall and the looming anniversary of the shooting, it was a way to move forward while holding Mr. Seal close.

“It feels like a sacred space to be in,” said Liz Seal, Mr. Seal’s wife, who served as a counselor at the camp while three of the couple’s four children attended. “We feel his energy here, everywhere.”

There was nothing solemn about the long, languorous days that the campers, who ranged in age from 6 to 16, spent at the sandy edge of North Pond. The camp, an hour north of Lewiston in the woodsy Belgrade Lakes region, differs little from others nearby for hearing children. Campers tie-dyed T-shirts, ran wild during a scavenger hunt, steered a pontoon boat toward an eagle’s nest and debated the merits of tater tots at lunch.



From left: Kevin Bohlin, a close friend of Mr. Seal who had partnered with him to start the camp; Liz Seal, Mr. Seal’s wife who also served as a counselor at the camp; and Jayson Seal, Mr. Seal’s 13-year-old son.

With a mix of participants who sign and speak — or do both at once — the camp is rarely quiet. A tense dispute during a game of four square elicited bouts of impassioned signing, as well as very audible howls of outrage. A loud, lively mix of popular music — Miley Cyrus, Katy Perry, Lana Del Rey — played at the beach during morning swim, as Maya and her friends stood waist deep in the water holding hands, then dunked.

Later, back in Cabin 2, Maya broke out a few exuberant dance moves and showed off a stack of handmade friendship bracelets. The three girls had polled everyone at camp on their favorite colors, pretending it was for a survey; in secret, they planned to craft a bracelet for every camper and staff member by the time camp disbanded.

It was the unspoken understanding between them, they explained, that made their week together special. “Here, if I say ‘What?’ because I missed something, my friends will repeat it,” Autumn said. “At home I have a friend who’s sensitive, who sometimes gets mad if I ask her to repeat things, even though she knows I’m hard of hearing.”

At her school, Ingrid said, she is the only student who wears hearing aids, which connect to a special microphone that her teachers wear around their necks. “At camp, everyone understands what it’s like,” she added.

It wasn’t always easy to be away from home. Fionn McLoughlin, a seventh grader, said he had shed some tears after lights out, when unwanted thoughts of zombies crowded in. Kari Barry, 13, missed her mom, and worried about the one night when the campers would sleep outdoors.

“I’m scared an animal might come in the night,” Kari said, “and no one would hear it.”

Her counselor, sitting nearby, quickly reassured her.



The camp is in the woody Belgrade Lakes region of Maine.



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An hour or two later at an outdoor drama class, such fears had been forgotten. Fionn donned a wig and strummed a pink inflatable guitar, sweetly singing the Beatles' "Yesterday" without an ounce of self-consciousness.

The camp's enrollment has grown from nine in 2022 to 22 this August. Mr. Bohlin dreams of one day filling its six cabins to capacity, drawing as many as 100 campers from Maine and across the country.

"There are roughly 850 Deaf or hard-of-hearing kids in Maine — where are they?" he said. "They should be here."

Meli Stamp, a camp counselor, said campers trade advice about roadblocks they encounter in the hearing world, as well as recommendations for helpful cellphone apps and other tools, effortless discussions that they might be less likely to have with adults.

The camp experience can transform the children's vision of their own potential, Mr. Bohlin said. He recalled one 8-year-old camper who was stunned to realize that the camp was run by Deaf adults.

"He said to me and Josh, 'Are you both Deaf?' and I said yes, and he said, 'What about them?' I said, 'Yeah, them too.' And he said, 'I thought Deaf people died younger.'"

Lounging on the grass during swim time — while intermittently besieged by younger campers begging him to come and swim — Darris Winship, 16, said that "people often think Deaf people are stupid, that they can't be 'normal.' But we are so capable. My dad is completely Deaf and mute, and he's so talented with his hands, woodworking, drawing, painting, gardening."



For some of the 22 campers from around the state — many of whom are the only Deaf or hard-of-hearing students in their small rural schools — camp would be the only time all year they spent with peers who were like them in this way.

The deaths of Mr. Seal and his friends in Lewiston last year focused new attention on Maine's Deaf community, and its needs, after Deaf people struggled to access information after the shooting. Matt Webster, a camp counselor and Deaf community advocate, said he is pushing the state to do a better job of informing them in future emergencies.

In the wake of their losses, said Ms. Seal, Maine's Deaf community has grown closer, with more frequent, better attended gatherings. This fall, she plans to compete on a cornhole team like her husband's.

First, though, she savored watching her children, and the other campers Mr. Seal knew well, revel in their week at camp together. When memories surfaced, the campers spoke of him instead of tiptoeing around the subject. "It's refreshing, their candid way of being," Ms. Seal said.

At night, while some campers gathered by the fire, others spread out on the lawn, playing a fiercely competitive game of "Red Light, Green Light" with one modification: Instead of calling out commands to stop and go, the leader turned around to signal when the runners could advance, then spun back again to stop them.

Sitting by the fire one night, Ms. Seal's two older children noticed right away when one of the string lights draped above their heads suddenly began to flare and flicker.

To them, it could mean just one thing.

"We saw it blinking," 10-year-old Sephine Seal signed, "and we knew that it was Dad."

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