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In Montco, a camp where old is new

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Samantha Klein, draws back her arrow and takes aim at the target on the archery range at Burn Brae Camp in Upper Dublin on July 24, 2015. Burn Brae Camp in Upper Dublin which is offering an old-school camp experience that includes a focus on vintage sports with not a electronic screen in site. (ED HILLE / staff photographer)

by **Kristin E. Holmes**, Inquirer Staff Writer

At the Burn Brae Day Camp, bocce is not just a game for grandfathers, and Cole Porter's songs get as much respect as Ariana Grande's.



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A visitor is as likely to see students weaving on a loom as tapping on a computer keyboard. In fact, the digital lab is in a basement like so much stored-out-of-the-way-until-necessary stuff.

Burn Brae has a thing for the classic and the old-school, vintage over vogue.

Lisa Kasser, founder and director of the 34-year-old camp in Upper Dublin Township, Montgomery County, says Burn Brae is about an old-fashioned concept: human contact.

"Children are so immersed in technology they don't even speak to each other; they text," she said. "We want them to talk to each other, navigate friendships, relate eye-to-eye."

So, Kasser has crafted a version of day camp that evokes an old-fashioned way of having fun. She's spotlighting classic games, music, and arts and crafts to introduce youngsters to activities they may not know about to help them connect and socialize with one another.

Students make their own paint. Learn bluegrass and the banjo. Play badminton, chess, checkers, and try to wield a bow and arrow, Katniss Everdeen-style.

The camp, in a rustic setting off Twining Road, opens in June and becomes a bustling daytime home for nearly 250 campers, ages 3 to 15, who come and go through the camp's 10 weeks.

Burn Brae's retro approach actually is a fresh one, in contrast to some tech-driven camps that try to stay ahead of the hottest trends, said Cheryl Magen, former president of the American Camp Association's Keystone Regional Section.

Burn Brae is "introducing children to activities that their parents may have done as kids or that camps may have offered in the '50s, '60s and '70s," but are brand new to campers today, Magen said.

"This camp is just so great," said musician Jordan Singer, 11, who wrote the official camp song. "There are the fun songs I play, the fun shows I do, and there are a whole bunch of other fun things."

Singer talked about the school while a camp band played a version of Porter's "De-Lovely" on a small stage behind him.

For Singer, of Ambler, the best thing about Burn Brae is that "you choose."

Kasser has organized the camp like a kind of Burn Brae University. Students 7 and older select a major class, four minors, and a sports elective - and, yes, some do use the digital lab.

Many camps organize students in groups that participate in activities as one unit during much of the day, according to the American Camp Association website. Burn Brae is a rare day camp where students pick not just some of their daily activities, but all of them.

Kasser, a former actress who has appeared in local productions at the People's Light & Theatre Company in Malvern and on the New York stage, founded the camp in 1981 after working as an associate producer on the TV show *Dancin' on Air*. Kasser chaperoned stars such as Kelly Ripa and auditioned teen dancers for the *American Bandstand*-style show that was broadcast live from WPHL-TV studios in Wynnefield.

She said she started the camp because she wanted to introduce youngsters to the arts and activities that she believed could help them the way they once helped her.

"I was a severe stutterer," said Kasser, who grew up in Rydal and Coral Gables, Fla. "[Theater] was a way for me to get out of my own skin. It gave me confidence."

The camp is open for 10 weeks and cost ranges from \$375 to \$700 a week, depending on transportation services, financial aid, and special discounts that are available.

Burn Brae - Scottish for wood hill by a stream - offers arts activities such as theater, dance, band, and ceramics, as well as science-related subjects alongside the recreational activities.

On Friday, campers Alexis Rosen, Anna Levinson, and Quindella Dodson played a game of bocce on the grass.

Rosen, 13, of Mishawaka, Ind., had never heard of the game. Levinson, 13, of Southampton, saw it on an episode of the TV show *Cake Boss*. Dodson, 12, of Ambler, has watched her dad play but never participated until Burn Brae.

"You don't have to be as coordinated and athletic as other sports," Rosen said. "It's more calm and not so competitive."

Perfect for grandfathers, and maybe even youngsters at day camp that Kasser says is trying to squeeze in a little old-school history in between the fun.

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