

Bournelyf Special Camp – A Stream of Life in Westtown

by *Stephen Wahrhaftig, Historical Commissioner*

Westtown residents often notice several signs posted by driveways on South New Street between West Pleasant Grove Road and General Green Drive. One sign announces the Church of the Loving Shepherd, and nearby, a green sign with two hands grasped in friendship within an image of a sunrise indicates the entrance to the Bournelyf Special Camp. The Historical Commission recently spoke with the directors of Bournelyf to learn about its history and purpose.



South New Street once hosted a 500-acre farm dating back to the Battle of Brandywine days of the 1700s. The land had originally been part of a 1,000-acre grant to John Collet from William Penn. Eventually, portions of the dairy and fruit farm were divided and sold. A section purchased by the Adams family was named Dunvegan Farm in the 1920s, based on the Scottish Dunvegan Castle, owned by their family heritage, Clan MacLeod. Nearby Dunvegan Road in Westtown's South Hills area survives to this day.

In the early 1970s, 20 acres of the Adams property were sold to the Church of the Loving Shepherd who moved to South New Street from Delaware County. Eventually, the property was

consecrated by a Moravian bishop (The Right Reverend Herbert Spaugh), and the farm's barn was converted for use by a growing congregation. The church remains very active today. The group chose to rename the property 'Bournelyf' which means "Stream of Life" in Middle English.

In the late '70s, a swim instructor at a local YMCA, Jim Scanlon, approached the church to create a new type of camp for kids with special needs. We spoke with Jim and his wife Marilyn along with camp director Rick Curth and Anne Catlin, who have a long history at the camp. They explained that when forming ideas for this camp, they recognized that kids with special needs were not exposed to a summer camp that was offered to normal children. As Jim explained, "Kids with special needs were given easy projects like making macaroni collages, instead of getting out and hiking or swimming like other children."

Jim and his wife joined the church and were married on the grounds of Bournelyf. Having experience with special needs kids, they worked with the church to develop the camp in 1981, starting out with 6-8 kids and young adults with a month-long program that used the swimming facilities at nearby West Chester State College where Jim had been a student.

As the camp's membership grew, activities like canoeing and horseback riding were added. The kids also learned to perform - an annual "Circus" is presented by the campers to their friends and families. At first, some people expressed concern about the ambitious plans for the camp. Many did not feel that children with special needs could safely participate in the kinds of activities that normal campers did.

Anne explained, "People pointed out that some of these kids needed more time to accomplish a task, which could be frustrating. But these kids could do these things, which gave them a great sense of accomplishment."

Marilyn added, "Many of these kids had no idea what they would experience - they showed up with suitcases and had never been in a tent before. We wanted to give them an experience that regular kids had - a regular Adventure Camp. The idea was to challenge them with opportunities they never had before, like horseback riding. It was wonderful!"

Over time, Bournelyf Special Camp helped the campers grow and become more confident, just as any camp can do for kids. For example, there is an activity involving maps and compass apps that the campers and counselors use in the woods to locate the place their lunch is stored. Parents began reporting that the higher level of activity seemed to improve the well-being of their kids; the campers were sleeping better than they ever did before.

Occasionally, the challenges presented, like climbing a water slide, would give a camper pause, but once they accomplished the task, they would beam with pride. Anne said even the parents learned. "Cars would pull up and the folks would be carrying the lunch boxes and backpacks and we would ask them to let the campers manage their own things." This provided life skills and in Anne's words, "let the campers realize that they were capable individuals."

Rick Curth, the camp director, had explained that while the age level was originally limited with a maximum age of participation, some campers so loved their Bournelyf experience that the age

limits were discarded. Anne pointed out that some campers have been attending since 1989, forming a participating "Alumni" group. Bournelyf Special Camp gradually took on campers from Westtown as well as the rest of Chester County.

Recently Bournelyf procured the property they use from the Church of the Loving Shepherd. The beautiful, wooded property has an Olympic-sized swimming pool, hiking and horse trails, and an elaborate "challenge course" with structures that the campers can exercise and climb on. The course also forms a platform for the annual "Camp Circus."



Challenge Course at Bournelyf Special Camp

Today Bournelyf Special Camp continues to thrive. They partner activities with organizations like the Chester County Food Bank. By promoting activities in the community both the campers and the community learn more about each other. This fosters a growing awareness that special needs people can be important contributors to our community.

BOURNELYF SPECIAL CAMP

The next time you travel past that green sign with the logo of friendship and a rising sun, remember that a beautiful, wooded property stretching back to pre-colonial days in Westtown continues to improve the lives of many. Residents interested in learning more about Bournelyf Special Camp can email info@bscwc.org, call 610-692-9027, or visit: <https://www.bscwc.org/>.