

Camp for Teens

By Julia Hengst

Vajrapani's Family Camp in Boulder Creek, California has been going strong for fifteen years now. Unlike ordinary camps, where kids go off for the summer and parents stay at home, Family Camp includes everyone – parents and kids alike. There's only one hitch: the kids can only participate from five up to age twelve. They have the option to become junior counselors, but they can no longer return as campers.

Parents of soon-to-be teens had voiced their concerns for the past couple of years, asking if we could create a Buddhist camp for the teens. Many who are now teens had been coming to Family Camp for years. "Teens need this sort of camp even more than little kids," a few of the parents said.

A small team – Anna and Lisa Landaw, Sharon Gross and myself – took on the challenge and presented Vajrapani's first-ever Teen Family Camp in July. We decided that parents would have their own track and invited Lois Greenwood to teach her curriculum on Managing Your Emotions for the "parent track," which included a day of silence – something the teens loved and encouraged more of! The parents raved about Lois's program and their work with the five elements/Buddha-families incorporated in it.

Twelve teens, ages 13-16, bonded during activities like watching a teen-specific documentary (*Devil's Playground* – highly recommended), making personalized mandalas under Lisa Landaw's meditational instruction, going on nature walks, doing a Dorje Khadro fire puja and practicing various kinds of meditation.

From the side of the organizers, what stood out most about the teens was their inclusiveness. Although two of the



Camaraderie at Family Camp

teens were brand new, they were easily assimilated into the group, which soon became inseparable – everyone taking walks together between sessions, sitting together at meals, playing card games – and no one was left out.

All twelve teens were enthusiastic about responding to *Mandala's* request for feedback from young people. Here are their responses:

The voice of youth

Kiley Nygren, age 13: Whenever I am going through a tough time I speak with my friends. They let me drain out my feelings, and they talk me through ways to deal with my situations. I am able to get through hard times in a positive rather than negative way.

Ben Hoerber, age 15: To deal with negativity I try to turn that anger and rage into a drive for excellence. It helps to have goals like in a sport, school or in a job. I have set goals and achievements for myself in the sports I do and in school. Transforming negativity into a drive helps me put my all into everything.

Tamara Tanujaya, age 13: I've learned that even though you're around annoying people who bug you, you don't have to argue about every little annoying thing they say. If they constantly make you irritated, and you get into an argument every time, then you're upset all the time. Unless what the person says is "too much," then I try not to flip out at them, 'cause then I'd be in a fight all the time!

Zia Mars, age 14: Everyday there is so much drama that happens. People are so mean to each other for no reason. So I try to look on the bright side of things. If someone is mean to me I just ignore them and move on. I try not to get caught up in that stuff, and when I do, it turns out to be a pointless war that only makes everybody feel really bad.

Max Kauert, Age 14: When I'm going through a hard time in my life I can always count on my friends. With most of my friends I feel comfortable enough to talk about my feelings, and they usually make me feel better.

Jacob Barone, age 14: Negative thoughts are going to come if you want them or not. One way to avoid negative thoughts is going out and being with someone that is always happy. Another way is to be with a pet – like a dog. Dogs are nice because they are always happy and want to play. Dogs are a good way to cool off and take your mind away from your problems. The best way to help a friend is to listen. Listening is a great way to make someone feel good. Your friends will feel like someone is listening.

Aja Hartman, age 14: When I feel down, I smile, because when I do, no matter how hard it was to start smiling, my emotions eventually change. I become happy. After this, my emotion spreads outward, and then eventually everyone around me ends up laughing. So the moral I guess is, "it only takes one smile to make a whole room laugh."

Allegra Colston, age 15: In order to stay positive in a negative situation, I employ a certain way of thinking. If something negative happens to me, I know I can either choose to react positively or negatively. Even if the world seems to be a negative place, it is not negative at all. The darkness that we perceive is really only the culmination of all the negative actions we perform. We build "rooms" around ourselves, blocking out the light of the world. By remembering that each and every negative action and

reaction that we have only further add to these "rooms," I give myself the power to choose only positive things. Though it may not always work, this effectively opens our minds to the possibility that we can destroy these walls ourselves and become once again immersed in light.

Tara Patrick, age 16: A major part of staying positive in my life is humor. Whenever a friend of mine is feeling down, the main thing I try to do is listen to what they have to say, and then try and cheer them up by making them laugh. Making others laugh makes me so happy because not only does it makes them feel better, but to me laughing is somewhat of a chain reaction. When one person in a room starts laughing, usually the others cannot help but join in. In my case, just seeing the look on my friends' faces after I've made them laugh cheers me up, because I enjoy seeing them happy. In short, making others happy keeps me happy.

Kevin Landaw, age 16: Sometimes when you watch the news or read a newspaper, you can see how much death and suffering there is in the world. To help combat this negativity I try to realize how everyone and everything values its own life more than anything else. Realizing this allows you to relate to the people and animals around you, who all have this in common. I try to work this into my everyday life by trying my best not to kill insects or small animals in my home.

Miranda Deguglielmo, age 13: Last summer, one of my friends was having a birthday party. When we were around, people would say they don't like her, or that they didn't want to go to her party because of a rumor they'd heard. I could have gone along with them and said I didn't want to go either, but I thought, "Wow, it's her birthday, and how would they feel if nobody went to *their* birthday party?" So I decided that I was going to go – she is my friend and rumors aren't always true. It was a great party after all.

Jessie Thomas, age 14: To keep positive in everyday life, I just stop and think about the great things in life that overcome the bad. I also look to my friends to be comforted. They always put a smile on my face – even just remembering good times I've had with them can make my day a lot better. ☺

Julia Hengst is pursuing a graduate degree in journalism at the University of California – Berkeley. See also "A Great Adventure for Teens" in this issue.