

Making Memorable Summers

Giving kids with Asperger's syndrome a place to feel at home is the goal of a Rochester alumna-designed camp.

By Katina Antoniades

Debbie Friedman Sasson '99, '00W (Mas) loves summer camp. One of her best friends was her bunkmate when she was 12. She met her husband, Eric, in 2000 when they worked at the same camp. And she plans to continue managing her current camp indefinitely. "This is really our lives," she says. "We've committed to be camp directors."

character in *The Jungle Book*, which Eric reads to campers each week.

Although many camps are designed for children with special needs, Camp Akeela is unique, says Sasson. "We're really the only camp that is this narrow—in other words, [for] really high-functioning kids, without physical disabilities, highly intelligent, but who just need help with social development." This year, campers hail from 18

needs children. Debbie completed the 3-2 program at the Warner School for a degree in school counseling and earned her doctorate in clinical psychology this year. "I've always been drawn to the kids who need a little extra support," she says. Eric has a master's in education from Harvard.

The Sassons' employer, CampGroup, gave them the freedom to design their own program. The couple consulted with professionals in the field—one of them happens to be Debbie's father, a clinical psychologist who works with kids with Asperger's—as well as parents.

"We really designed a program that we thought would infuse community and independence," says Sasson.

The site needed work, too. "We took over a property that was a former camp . . . and we had to do a lot of repair," says Sasson. "So that was a big challenge."

Campers at the renovated 400-acre property—complete with its own lake—find plenty of activities to keep busy, like archery, boating, swimming, and drama. Groups of campers take turns cleaning their bunks, cleaning up around camp, and setting up the dining hall for meals.

The Sassons also foster a sense of community by holding nightly meetings during which campers can make suggestions and receive recognition for their achievements in activities or friendship development as well as twice-daily bunk meetings to discuss how everyone is doing.



The Sassons live in Westchester County in New York, but from June until September, they work in the upper valley of Vermont, running their second summer camp together. Camp Akeela helps children who have Asperger's syndrome (one of the autism spectrum disorders) or nonverbal learning disabilities, and others, to develop their social skills, meet new friends, and have fun. "Akeela" means "bright and intelligent" in Arabic and is the name of a

states and three countries.

In addition to their childhood camp experiences and later camp management positions, the Sassons' backgrounds make them well suited to manage a camp for special

▲ **HOPEFUL COMMUNITY:** "My hope is that they feel like they can gain independence while also being part of a community," says Sasson of the children who attend Camp Akeela.

Speaking during the second week of camp, Sasson says she is impressed by her staff and surprised at how well the children are settling in.

"The other day—we have a campfire once a week, and spontaneously, the kids just sort of stood up and put their arms around each other," she says. "And for these kids, that's really big. Not all of them like to be touched, and not all of them have ever had a really good friend before. So Eric and I



looked at each other and were wowed by the fact that we had helped create this experience for these kids that they may not have ever had before."

During the year, many of the campers are mainstreamed in school, says Sasson. They may be bullied, feel left out, and have strong interests—in math or history, for example—that can set them apart from their classmates. Sasson wants them to feel the

same sense of belonging and community at Camp Akeela that she enjoyed at camp and during her years at Rochester.

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▲ CAMP COMRADERIE: Sasson (right) and her husband, Eric, who together designed the programs for Camp Akeela, met when they worked at a camp in 2000.

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of a community," she says. "And for a lot of these kids, my hope would be just [for them] to have one friend that they feel really connects with them, so that when they go home during the year, they feel like they're OK—that they have a buddy, that they can be accepted somewhere. And if they can look forward to coming to Akeela every summer and that's their home, that's their safe place, that would be my hope." **R**