

Kindervolk

AT THIS LINCOLN POND CAMP,
IT'S ALL ABOUT FAMILY—
AND EVERYONE'S FAMILY

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY
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The keg had been tapped,

the morning's firewood-stacking conga line completed, and the day's festivities were well underway when I walked up Kindervolk's dirt driveway on a Saturday afternoon last August. I followed the sound of cheering coming from behind a stand of tall pines and hardwoods, where several dozen people were watching the hole-in-one competition—part of a full schedule of quirky activities at this annual Lincoln Pond gathering.

As I approached, Beverly Lawson, a hale 79-year-old crowned with cirrus-wisps of white hair, hugged me like an old friend, though we'd met only once. The week before, I had sat with Bev and her husband, Eric, in their gazebo while they told me the story of their camp and the summer blowout they've been hosting there for over four decades.

In 1970, they were camping at Rogers Rock, on Lake George, when they used a rainy day to drive around and look for land to buy. They lived with their two young children, Laurie and Scott, in Colonie, where Eric was a labor mediator and Bev was a nurse at Albany Medical Center. Though they didn't have much money, they found an overgrown property they could afford near Lincoln Pond, about six miles south of Elizabethtown. They built a simple A-frame, off-the-grid cabin over a series of work weekends,

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paying friends in beer and camaraderie.

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Those freeform days in the woods led him into more serious scientific inquiry as an adult, when he got his PhD in entomology.

In the first few years, it was just the Lawsons and three other families, all neighbors in Colonie, who spent time at Kindervolk. Then, in 1977, the Lawsons began throwing an annual party. Over time, the guest list grew to include new colleagues, neighbors and friends. Eric went to law school and became a labor arbitrator, and Bev got her doctorate in psychology and began working with victims and perpetrators of sexual abuse. They moved to Buffalo, and later, Saratoga Springs. Laurie and Scott grew up and invited their schoolmates, got married and had children of their own—who invited their friends, and so on. These friends from disparate parts of the Lawsons' lives often formed their own relationships; one pair who met at Kindervolk went on to hike the Northville-Placid Trail together.

And once someone was invited, they were welcome in perpetuity, so that by last August, the event's 41st anniversary, there were some 70 guests, from first-timers to the surviving members of the original Colonie neighbor group. They included Jean-Guy and Danielle, a couple from Montreal with whom Eric had once struck up a conversation at the Essex marina, and Korri and Dean Fleming, year-round New Russia residents who were working on their property more than a decade ago when

Beverly and Eric Lawson, at right, have thrown an annual summer party at their camp for over 40 years. Betty and Bill Martin, top right, with their daughter and granddaughter, who took second place in the hors d'oeuvres contest. PAGES 56-57: The hole-in-one competition is part of a packed schedule of quirky activities planned during the party.



the Lawsons decided to stop their car and introduce themselves. “I never met anyone like that, to just walk up to you and become friends,” said Korri.

As host and master of ceremonies, Eric moved around the camp in a well-worn flannel with the sleeves rolled up, his permanent expression a sympathetically furrowed brow, while he played a game of volleyball here, introduced a new guest there, and ensured a good time was had by all.

Mike Maginn, who’s been coming to Kindervolk for 35 years, said, “I think Eric is the Pied Piper of the Adirondacks. He has a way of relating to young and old and involving everyone.”

Despite the absence of Internet or cable—or maybe because of it—the teens and young adults of the third generation of Kindervolkers are as passionate in their love for the place as their parents and grandparents. Bernie Phillips, whose father worked with Eric in the 1960s, said his children had almost given up the chance to go to Europe the year before because it would have meant missing the party. “We could either be around the campfire with Eric or we could see the Pope,” he said. “It was a hard decision.”

The party has evolved over time. As lives got busier and aging backs became less tolerant of the rustic accommodations—the cabin sleeps 14, with most of the other guests pitching tents around the property—the average stay has shortened, with most of the organized activities planned for Saturday. The 20 Cable Kindervolk Sail Boat Race was a mainstay for years, but was discontinued as fewer people owned boats. Lawn games and an hors d’oeuvres—or houeours douvers, as the typed-up schedule spelled it—competition are constants, though the rules, and misspellings, might change from year to year.

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When Scott married his wife, Darlene, after proposing on Algonquin Peak, they held two celebrations: one in Canastota and one at Kindervolk. Sadder occasions have also been marked, though often in signature Kindervolk style. A memorial garden of pinwheels labeled with the names of those who have died sits in a quiet corner near some birches.

Eric’s father, known as Doc, is one of four people whose ashes have been spread on the property. A gruff fellow with a sly sense of humor—a photo of him in the cabin shows him drinking a beer while wearing a T-shirt printed with a photo of himself drinking a beer—he came to Kindervolk every chance he got. “When I told him I was going to law school,” Eric recalled, “he didn’t say congratulations. He just said, ‘You aren’t going to sell the camp, are you?’”

At Doc’s Kindervolk memorial, Eric played Doc’s favorite classical song, “The Pines of Rome,” from a boombox on their tractor, and decorated the trailer like a Roman chariot. Guests wore togas and were each given a bit of Doc’s ashes to spread at a spot that held memories of him. “He’s all over this place,” said Bev.

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The first memorial held here was around 1980, for two children of friends, a 13-year-old with blood cancer and a college student killed by a drunk driver. The families recited the Shel Silverstein poem “The Giving Tree” in front of the birches, which were about 15 feet tall; now they’re nearly double that.

Far from casting a pall over the festivities, the pinwheel garden is a reminder of the preciousness of the community the Lawsons and their friends have created. At the awards ceremony, after the houeours douvers ballots had been counted and the three-minute window for “grievances” to be heard had passed (there were none), Eric hopped on a soapbox and gave a short speech. “Please go visit the pinwheel memorial garden honoring the people who’ve preceded us,” he said. “That’s our heritage. We’re all going to join them eventually, I hate to tell you.”

Winston, the new college boyfriend of one of the guests, was asked to introduce himself to the group. “I’m amazed by how much of this is built by hand, and the number of friendships started here,” he said. “And that something like this can last so long.”

Then it was time for dinner, with bratwurst, corn on the cob and baked beans, followed by berries and cake. A few of the old-timers grumbled good-naturedly about the simple menu chosen by the “young people”—the 50-something-year-olds who had recently taken over responsibility for preparing the Saturday-night meal—while waxing nostalgic about pig roasts past. In truth, they admitted, they found it gratifying to pass the baton to the next generation and see them run with it.

Soon the sky would darken and everyone would head up the hill to the roaring bonfire, where they would talk and laugh into the night. Someone might break out a ukelele.

It was time for me to go. As I said good-bye to Bev and Eric, they repeated the invitation they had made several times during the day, to come again the following year—and to bring my family. Once you’re in, you’re in.

“See you next year,” they said. ▲

