

CAMPING AND SAVING LIVES IN AFRICA

By William Nicoson

For Reston lawyer Phil Lilienthal, camping has been a way of life throughout his life as it was for his father before him. In 1974 Phil inherited Camp Winnebago in the Belgrade Lakes region of Maine and has managed it every summer since. Residential programs vary from four to eight weeks. Phil is now in the process of turning management over to his son, Andy.

Phil spent two formative years (1965-67) as a volunteer with the Peace Corps in Ethiopia. As what he called a "side project," he set up a residential summer camp for young people which was highly successful. At the end of his tour in Ethiopia, the camp was taken over by the YMCA.

This year Lilienthal created a nonprofit corporation, WorldCamps, Inc., with the mission of establishing residential summer camps in African countries, particularly those battling the AIDS epidemic. He visited South Africa, Botswana and Kenya in May and will return to Africa this month.

In Soweto, South Africa, Lilienthal joined forces with an HIV/AIDS clinic called HIVSA to plan the opening of a camp next January as a 9-day pilot project. The site has been selected, and staff recruitment and training are underway. Two well-regarded U.S. training organizations will participate.

Lilienthal speaks eloquently about the benefits offered by a two-week residential program providing young people with information on good health practices, opportunities for sustained communication among each other, educational peer training, and not least, the fun and enjoyment of comradeship which many children in AIDS-infected families have never known.

These children have known antagonism and ostracism though they may not themselves suffer from HIV or AIDS. For them, a kind smile and gentle encouragement will work a revolution of the spirit. They will find themselves enjoying the playing fields and the lake. They will learn basic hygiene and be offered healthy meals. They will find that brushing teeth can become a valuable habit and that fruit and vegetables are as savory as sugared pastries. Their worn and ragged clothing will be replaced by sturdy and durable ware.

They will also meet children from tribes other than their own. South Africa has twelve official languages. Campers at the Lilienthal grounds will be astonished to learn how language and habits of new buddies may differ from their own. Their minds will be opened to the wonders of diversity. And their consciousness will absorb elements of what we call the fine art of "conflict resolution."

Meanwhile efforts will be made to prepare their families for what may prove challenging reentry trauma at the end of the projected 2-week sessions. Some 100 children will come and go from

the Lilienthal camp from early January through the end of June, 2004. Advising parents on reinforcing new habits and diets will be essential, sensitive and time-consuming. In my view, this will be the most difficult aspect of camp planning and an aspect for which Camp Winnebago offers few lessons.

Lilienthal is hard at work raising the necessary funds for his first camp near Soweto. Too bad he didn't cross paths with Bill and Melinda Gates who just announced in Mozambique grants totaling \$168 million to fight malaria. The HIV-AIDS onslaught in Africa is even more deadly than malaria, and the deterioration of children's lives in the affected families far worse. Lilienthal has dedicated his valuable time and expertise to help these children, and he and his cause deserve the financial support he seeks.

William Nicoson is a lawyer who has visited Africa frequently.