

HINDU HERITAGE YOUTH CAMP

1985-2009

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to Learn, Practice, Promote, and Preserve
Hindu Culture**

it is important to spend time learning more about our own Indian culture, and what makes it so special... Every year, the questions and insightfulness of the campers allows me think about my religion in new and unique ways.

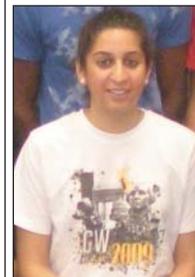


Nikita Malani,
co-director
2009 Hindu
Heritage
Youth Camp.



2009

July 21 to 26



Sujata Amin,
co-director
2009 Hindu
Heritage
Youth Camp.

For 24 years, Hindu children in Houston have marked their calendars and urged their summers to rush by in anticipation of camp and enjoy five days that change their lives and make them better people. Who says "Year 25" will be any different?



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Genesis of the Hindu youth camp

By **SHARAD AMIN**

In 1960's to the late 1970's, the first generation Hindus coming from Bharat were busy studying, getting permanent residence, and settling down in the United States. They stabilized their lives and shouldered the responsibility of raising the family.

Once in their 40's, they began realizing that their growing children were losing touch with Hindu culture, and felt it was an urgent and significant issue.

In 1984, after a Hindu Dharma conference in New York's Madison Square Garden, some attendees from Houston talked about starting youth activities in the Houston area.

Soon afterward, the first outdoor, summer day camp took place in Houston's Bayland Park in 1985.

The Vishwa Hindu Parishad of America (VHP-A) and the Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh (HSS) families meticulously planned the six-hour camp.

After the success of the day camp, the first overnight

residential camp was held in 1986 at the Jewish Community Center's Ida Gordon Campsite in Richmond.

This was a monumental event that would make its mark for years to come. Planning for the camp started at the homes of Dilipi and Kusum Mehta's house.

Anjalee Pandya, a VHP-A volunteer experienced in running the camp on the east coast, traveled from Boston to guide a team in Houston.

Houston team members Suresh V. Patel, Dinesh Shah and Sharad Amin worked closely with Anjaleeji from day one to plan and execute the camp which became a popular tradition in Houston.

One member of the team Suresh Patel brought his extensive experience as a professional physical educator to the table, as well as his experience with running camps.

See next page



HHC volunteers in 1987: From Left to Right, Top Row: Jugal Malani, Ashok Sanghvi, Sharad Amin, Dilip Mehta, Suresh Patel, and Rama Subramaniam; Middle Row: Meera Kapur, (unidentified man), Raj Gupta, Vijay Pallod, Daksha Shah, Dinesh Shah; Bottom Row: Amita Amin, Ramesh Shah, Malikarjun Shintri, Kokila Shah.

Genesis of the Hindu youth camp

He had worked as a yoga instructor at JCC for some time and made it possible for the camp to take place at the venue.

VHP-A volunteers and HSS families including Dr. Chandraahans and Ushji Misra, Ramesh and Kiranben Bhutada, Subhash and Saroj Gupta, Malikarjun Shintri, Dr. G. S. Gopalkrishna, Dr. Haku Israni and Ramesh Shah came together to plan this first overnight camp.

They received support from other Hindu organizations such as Hindu Worship Society, Chinmaya Mission, Sri Meenakshi Temple, Jain Society, BAPS, and some local businesspersons such as Ramesh Parikh of Sara International.

Volunteers for the first camp included many friends and relatives of the core volunteers. There were about 40 campers in attendance, and home-cooked meals were prepared at the camp site with a tremendous amount of teamwork. Suresh Patel was first camp director.

Shintri started the day with yoga.

Then came the Indian and American games followed by education classes and breakfast.

Arts and crafts were afternoon creative entertainment, while recreation such as swimming and canoeing were big attractions for kids. In the ranch-type atmosphere, hay rides and horse rides gave children the flavor of country life.

In 1987 and onwards, more adult volunteers joined the camp in planning and execution.

Jugal Malani took care of camp security. Rakesh Bhalla helped in Vyvastha. Vijaykumar Pallod took charge of publicity and media work.

With limited facility to provide home cooked food at the camp was a challenge but Amita Amin, Kiran Bhutada, Kokila Shah, Daksha Shah, Sudha Parikh, Bina Patel and so many part time volunteers made this possible and set up the standard menu which children loved and looked forward to at every camp.

After couple of years a new team got developed under Sushma Pallod's leadership.

Youth volunteers started taking more interests and counselors like Amit Misra, Hamsa Subramaniam, Padma, Nagesari, Manisha Gandhi (Mehta), Kumar, Rakesh Patel and many more joined the Hindu Heritage camp team.

By 1990, youngsters that were campers were groomed to run the camp. Directors and counselors

like Rakhi Israni, Amit Misra, Maneesh Mehra, Nutan Mehta, Mohan Drakshram, Rishi Master, Rishi Bhutada, Ronak Shah, Alok Kanojia, Nimit Patel, Seema Shah, Samit Shah, Sweta Gupta, Kruti Parekh, Priyanka Parekh, Sumit Desai, Sapana Desai and many more have made a big difference in making the camp what it is today.

Even after these individuals have moved on to pursue other endeavors in their lives, they continue to advise, help, and stay involved with the camp in whatever way they can.

Doctors who keep coming back every year are Dr. Uma Knojia, Dr. Meena Parekh. Dr. Gopalkrishna, Dr. Neeta Shukla, Dr. Kavita Chandwani and recently Dr. Heenaben Pandya who came from China with her daughters for the camp.

Past camp directors were Suresh Patel (first), Manish Mehra (First youth director), Rakhi Israni, Nutan Mehta, Rishi Bhutada, Samhitha Murthy, Maulik Shah, Alok Kanojia, Ronak Shah, Nimit patel, Rishi Master and Supratik Moulik

After 25 years the camp has not changed a lot except for the duration; the once 3-day camp is now 5 days long. The first camp had 40 campers. Today it is has grown to 150 and some children are wait-listed.

The little kids who were crawling and tumbling on the floor are today counselors and directors making decisions and working hard to keep Hindu Heritage going for generations to come. The second generation members who were counselors are now on the steering committee.

This is the place where no matter how old one is, whatever background one hails from, or what profession one is in, all work together toward a common purpose: to foster Hinduism and to do this in a joyous environment.

(Sharad Amin (in a 1987 file picture) is one of the founders of the VHPA camp. At present he is Hindu swayam Sevak Sangh national



public relations officer. His daughter Sujata is camp co-director this year.)

Next generation on Hindu youth camp

By **SUJATA AMIN**

This year marks the twenty-fifth anniversary of Hindu Heritage Youth Camp. From its humble beginnings, this event has become one of the greatest highlights of many Hindu children's summers. From this experience, many have developed lifelong friendships as well as self-confidence and pride in their heritage.

Though I had been brought to camp since my birth in 1987, I first officially attended as a camper at the ripe, young age of six.

I can still remember the educations I received about the Vedic scientists, in particular Susruta. Our counselor brought a Mr. Potato Head to complement his education on how this Hindu scientist pioneered into the field of plastic surgery. It was during these education hours that freedom fighters came to life, and complex Hindu philosophies were simplified for our young minds.

From this, the seeds of curiosity for culture and spirituality were planted into our minds, and I must say that they were nurtured well over the summers spent at camp—for many of the campers that were in my group at that time are now my fellow counselors and co-director.

Attending camp helped me realize how much a person can accomplish in a day. Starting with yoga and traditional Indian games in the morning, kids learn things about the physical side of Hindu culture that can be applied in a practical, everyday manner.

Children learn how to play some of their parents' favorite childhood like kho and kabbadi. With three engaging hour-long education sessions a day, kids learn about many things from the meaning of Hindu rituals and Hindustani music to Dharma and other Hindu concepts, each conveyed in a creative manner.

Despite the emphasis laid on developing pride in the kids' heritage, the fact that they live in America is not neglected. Children are encouraged to deal with the challenges Hindu children in the United States face on a daily basis.

In addition to the yoga, there is also an organized recreation period, which can consist of games ranging from Ultimate Frisbee to kickball.

These games encourage both teamwork and competitiveness while having a good time. There is also

a free recreation period, where campers can choose between canoeing, swimming, playing basketball or volleyball, or just relax and bond with their fellow campers and counselors.

Every night there is a different event that kids participate in. The first night is a scavenger hunt that tests the kids' ability to be resourceful. The next night, the talent show gives campers a chance to display their talents to their peers.

A night of Garba follows, which is a unique opportunity for the many kids who have never been able to attend one. The final night, skit night, is one of much laughter, fun, and sadness.

Realizing they have to go home, because camp doesn't go on forever, is the worst thing about camp. From the first day nervousness and anxiety that is relaxed by the icebreaker games played, to the absolute fun and innumerable amounts of lasting relationships forged, Hindu Heritage Camp makes confident and prideful Hindus that have a curiosity to explore their religion.

For 24 years, Hindu children in Houston have marked their calendars and urged their summers to rush by in anticipation of camp and enjoy five days that change their lives and make them better people. Who says "Year 25" will be any different?

Sujata Amin is a co-director for the this year's Hindu Heritage Youth Camp. She is a recent graduate from The George Washington University.



Sujata Amin, current camp co-director, gets her lessons early as a baby sitting on the lap of the first camp director Suresh Patel; at right is Dinesh Shah.

First director of Hindu Heritage Camp



Beth Kularni, left, Suresh Patel, (director of the first camp), Praveen Vyas and Subhash Gupta of VHP-A, Houston in a file picture at a recent Hindu Heritage Camp. Vyas is the current president of VHP-A Houston chapter and the others are former presidents of the organization

Coming from a small village in Gujarat, Suresh Patel had distinguished qualifications to be the first director of the Hindu Heritage Camp.

After completing his master's degree in Physical Education in Gwalior University, Sureshbhai came to Houston for further studies.

In addition to a good educational background, he had done community service including heading the movement to get training schools established for villagers who lost their land in the areas surrounding Gujarat Refinery and Indian Petro Chemicals Limited.

While in Houston, he joined the Jewish Community Center as a volunteer yoga teacher.

While providing services at the JCC, he came in contact with the director Stanley Rosenfeld which facilitated the community to have a place to start the first Hindu camp in 1985.

Volunteers of Vishwa Hindu Parishad of America and Hindu Swayam Sevak Sangh came together to hold a Hindu Heritage Camp, and they approached Sureshbhai and he became the part of the team.

With Anjaleeben Pandya's guidance and Dr. Mahesh Mehta's inspiration, the first camp began.

Many of the volunteers for the first camp came from the personal contacts and relatives of some of the core volunteers. The first camp had about 40 campers and home-cooked food prepared at the camp site was the result of unique teamwork.

Dr. Sindhwani of Indo American News interviewed the workers and an article came in the local newspaper. This was the beginning for the camp and the rest, as they say, rest is history...

(Suresh Patel was the director of the first Hindu youth camp.)

Directors of Hindu Heritage Camp



Suresh Patel, Rishi Bhutada, Ronak Shah and Nutan Mehta; Rear, Sushma Pallod left, Girish Naik, Pravin Vyas and Manish Mehra. (Camp directors from Manish to Nutan)

Message from the president of Vishwa Hindu Parishad of America

My sincere congratulations to VHP of America, Houston chapter on the 25th anniversary of Hindu Heritage Camp. The pioneers in Houston area have successfully preserved and passed over the great Hindu Heritage to the next generation. The campers of the early years are now the directors and running the Hindu Heritage Camps. Additionally their children are now participating as campers.

Hindu youth camp is an important program that VHPA had started decades ago in various parts of USA including Houston, TX. We are now seeing the great results of decades of dedication, commitment and selfless service of numerous VHPA workers - throughout USA in general and Houston in specific.

-Jyotish Parikh

Hindu Heritage Camp Food Coordinator



Sushma Pallo'd's job as food coordinator at the annual Hindu Heritage Camp is rewarding and challenging. She must plan and prepare, along with the help of her fellow volunteers, a fresh vegetarian meal for daily lunches and dinners for two hundred people.

The first coordinator at the camp was Amita Amin. Daksh Shah also served in this role.

Each day there are 10 to 15 volunteers helping at lunch and dinner. This year Dhirubhai's help will be missed. The food is served by camp counselors and the high school campers.

Every day the kitchen crew cooks different varieties of food. Some days the food is Indian and other days it is Mexican or Italian. One of the most popular dishes served at camp is pau bhaji.

The most important task is to make sure all the campers and counselors are well-fed and happy. The campers can often be impatient and eat a lot. There are no complaints from the food volunteers though.

The campers and counselors always are very pleased with the food. Another challenge is estimating the amount of food required, especially so that food is not wasted and planning to use leftovers (if any)

the next day.

As food coordinator, Sushma-Aunty, gets to meet and bond with all the counselors and campers. She also gets to see all of the fun activities done at camp like Holi and garba.

She finds that it is all worth it after the campers come up to her and say the food was great. This motivates her to come back year after year.

She also finds great pleasure in having her family involved in camp, whether it be as Namita as a camper, Kavita and Bharat as a counselor, and Vijay helping with media and miscellaneous work.

Sushma states "This has become our family project and we spend lots of time before camp as well as at camp working on this project."

"I really enjoy working for the counselors and kids. It's a lot of work, but I really enjoy it. When the kids run up to you and say "Aunty, aunty, the food was awesome", it takes all the pain away. Basically, I really believe that we need to set a good example for the next generation. Only when we go ahead and do this work will they be inspired to take over later."

Heritage Camp: Camper turns parent

By Rakhi Israni

I was a camper, counselor, and a camp director for the youth camps for more than 18 years. I am now a parent myself.

When I attended the camp as a camper, it was purely for fun.

Learning was something we did in between the games and other activities. I loved being together with my friends all day and all night. We would play Holi together, go canoeing together, eat watermelon together, and then scheme a way to throw one of us in the pool each day.

(This was hopefully the one that was fully clothed and not eager to swim that day.) I made my best friends (till today) through these “camping” experiences.

When I attended the camp as a counselor, it was initially for privileges.

After all the fun and games, at night, when all the campers have to go to sleep, the counselors could stay up, and no one would say anything! The job of counselor was perfect!

We could do everything the campers got to do during the daytime, but now we could talk all night, eat oreos in the kitchen, and “patrol” the campgrounds for safety.

But with such freedom, I guess naturally and eventually, comes a sense of purpose and responsibility. We had to prepare “extensive” lectures, organize the games and crafts, and somehow, through it all, inspire the kids.

As a counselor, you eventually can’t help but notice the lost feeling in a child, the budding desire to figure out why we are here, to know what’s important. Many of these kids just want to fit in.

Year after year of being a counselor, you slowly learn, during those few days, what makes a child confident in themselves and in their ability to accomplish things. And then you want to do just that.

As a counselor, the purpose of the education hours became more obvious.

It was unrealistic to think that we, with our limited knowledge, were actually teaching them things or that they were retaining all the information that we had prepared for our lectures.

Instead, as I realized many years later, we were actually just creating a spark of interest in each child. We were providing them the opportunity to learn when they were ready to learn.

Actually, more than anything, I think we were giving them bits of information during each lecture.

Hopefully, they could put it all together when they were ready.

More than the kids, I think I learned the most during my education hours. My spark of interest was ignited during my camper days.

By the time I became a camp director, I wanted to do so many things. I wanted to make a bigger difference by helping the counselors make a bigger difference.

I wanted to inspire confidence in the counselors so some would trickle down to the campers. I wanted to create lasting bonds not only between the campers, but also between the campers and counselors.

I wanted everyone to know how lucky he or she was to be a part of the greatest culture in the world. Whether I made any difference or not, I loved being a Hindu and I wanted others to feel it too.

Though my parents definitely contributed to this, the youth camps solidified this feeling for me.

I have a daughter now. Siya. She will be one year old on August 28, 2009.

The skills I learned during the youth camp, the knowledge I gained during the youth camps, and the people I met during the youth camps – I hope – will play a big role in making her a strong and confident human being.

I hope that we, as a society, are able to continue to build up such activities for the benefit of our children and for the eventual benefit of our society.



Former camper and camp director, Rakhi, now with daughter Siya.

Hindu Heritage Camp Outdoor



Hindu Heritage Camp 2009 Counselors



Adi	Sundararajan
Amit	Desai
Anamika	Sharma
Anjali	Baxi
Anjali	Dhingra
Anup	Parikh
Apoorva	Murthy
Apurva	Patel
Atit	Patel
Avi	Jain
Bharat	Pallod
Dharti	Patel
Eesha	Gulati
Gaurav	Ved
Geetanjali	Gubba
Kavita	Pallod
Krishna	Desai
Manoj	Kapoor
Maulik	Shah
Mukesh	Pillai
Nikita	Malani
Parul	Kapur
Priyanka	Parekh
Rishi	Bhutada
Ronak	Shah
Ruchita	Naik
Saagar	Grover
Sapna	Malani
Sujata	Amin
Tanya	Assar
Tricia	Assar
Vinay	Sarda

Hindu Heritage Camp



Mallikarjun Shintri, left, Acharya Gaurang Nanavaty of Chinmaya Mission Houston and Markandey during the 1987 camp.



Children play during Holi celebration at the Hindu Heritage Camp.

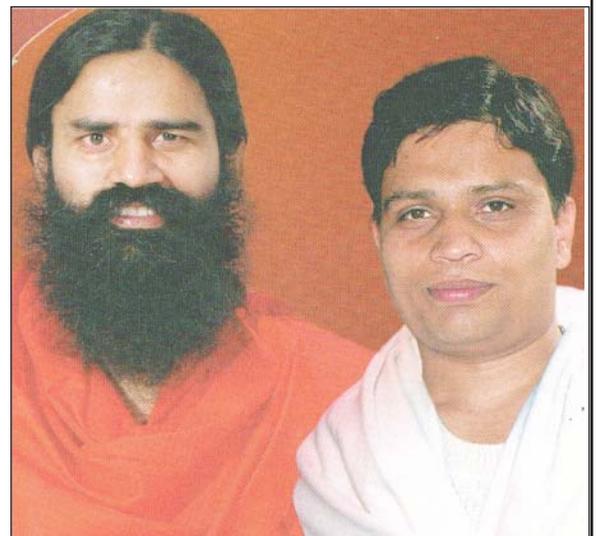


Patanjali Yogpeeth (USA) Trust

Our heartfelt congratulations and best wishes to Hindu Heritage Youth Camp on its 25th Anniversary!

We thankfully appreciate the generous support of Houston Community in our upcoming Yog and Herbal Research Center with Vanprasth in Rosenberg, Texas. Our Yog and Ayurveda Products (Books/DVDs/CDs/Herbal Supplements) will soon be available through our online store, www.divyaproducts.com, and retail store in Houston.

www.pyptusa.org



Swami Ramdev & Acharya.....

Hindu Heritage Camp

Comments from Campers, Counselors and Parents

Sending our children to the Hindu Heritage Camp has been a great decision. Along with the lessons on Indian culture and Hinduism, it has also introduced them to many of their closest friends whose families share similar values to ours. Both Pankaj and Nikita started as campers and later became counselors, a testament to how much they enjoyed camp and wanted to give back what they learned.

As parents and volunteers at this camp, it is a great opportunity for us to influence the choices made and values held by kids in our community. I personally have known many of these kids as they have grown up from elementary school to become doctors, lawyers, and business leaders. I know that the camps and

the positive values demonstrated there have influenced this development. We are very proud that Niki has accepted the responsibility to be the camp co-director. It is a job that takes a lot of planning and hard work and it will be an amazing opportunity to gain this experience before beginning medical school.



Jugal Malani

(Parent, long-time volunteer and supporter)

Camp has shaped my life in ways I would've never foreseen when I was a child and teenager. My interest in Hinduism and its philosophy was sparked by the various education sessions that I sat through at the camp. My inspiration into getting involved with Hindu community activities was from seeing the camp counselors and camp directors work so hard at putting the camp together every year. That launched me into becoming a camp counselor and then the camp director, something I would've never dreamed of being 15 years ago. In short, camp has taught me leadership skills as well as giving me a volunteering mindset that shapes my life today.

Rishi Bhutada

(Camper, Counselor, and Camp Director)

I haven't been to camp as a camper, only as a counselor, with my husband. However, I can easily see that the reason kids come, year after year, is for the life-long friendships that they forge at camp. I have not experienced anything in my life that compares to the bond that campers establish amongst each other in five short days.

Tejal Master

(Parent and former counselor)

In my experience the best part about camp is you have fun, without even realizing that you are learning about our religion and culture. When I am asked a question about Hinduism often I know the answer without consciously remembering that I learned that information at camp.

Rishi Master

(Camper, Counselor and Camp Director)

I have attended camp as a camper, counselor and director and have felt that camp really help grow my understanding, appreciation and pride in being a Hindu. Camp has consistently offered youth the opportunity to learn, teach and lead, fostering growth and strength at critical formative years. Spending time with others who are encountering similar challenges helps our youth understand they are not alone; the bonds and friendships formed at camp can be crucial in helping young people form positive and strong Hindu identities.

Maneesh Mehra

(Camper: 1987 – 1989 and Director: 1990 – 1994)

I've been involved with camp in one way or another for 16 years. The great part about camp for me is that I've felt that I have had an important impact every one of those 16 years. No matter what stage in life you are there is a role for you at camp.

Supratik Moulik

(Camper and Counselor)

See next page

Hindu Heritage Camp Outdoor

Because of VHP-A camp, I learned a great deal about my heritage in a few short days and made friendships that will last a lifetime.

Rishi Oberoi

(Camper: 2006 – 2009 and Senior at Strake Jesuit College Preparatory)

Camp has given me an opportunity to meet like-minded Hindus from across the city while providing me with the chance to enrich myself in the beautiful Hindu culture.

Vivas Kumar

(Camper and Senior at Katy Taylor High School)

Camp introduced me to not acquaintances, but to friends that I'll have with me all throughout my life.

Mukesh Pillai

(Camper: 2007 – 2008, Counselor: 2009 and Student at University of Houston)

VHP-A camp is one of those experiences that helped me discover my roots.

Rohan Pandula

(Camper: 2008 – 2009 and Senior at The Woodlands High School)

Since my son started attending the camp, he has become a different person. He regularly prays and does Aarti. He respects elders and is always curious to know more about our rituals and heritage.

A parent

The Hindu youth camp that VHPA holds every summer is a great experience for not only people who live in Texas, but also for those out of the state like me.

I am a sophomore at the University of Illinois in Urbana Champaign, from Chicago; and almost every year for the last 6 years I have been coming to the camp as a camper to gain new knowledge and experiences.

Learning about the Hindu gods, yoga, and cultural events have changed me as a person.

For the first time I am going to be a counselor at the Hindu youth camp this year, and am truly looking forward to sharing the many years of knowledge and un-

derstanding of the Hindu culture that I have gain with the elementary campers that I will be counseling.

For that reason I am becoming a counselor at the camp; teaching the next generation to understand our culture and the background that they come from.

This camp has been running for the last 25 years, and I am honored to be a part of this camp, and am proud to help in anyway I can. This camp has helped to make me the person I am now, and I encourage all parents to send their children to this camp as well.

Sapna Malani

Chicago

Being a President of VHP-A (Houston Chapter) , I am proud, honored and thrilled to be a part of the celebration of 25Th year of Hindu Heritage Camp, organized by VHP-A Houston chapter. As a President I observe and experience the outcome of this camp is amazing. I am happy to see many young men/women are doing very well in their personal, professional and public life. I am very happy to say that in the camp they learn and develop positive attitude, confidence and leadership qualities. They also learn the importance of vegetarian diet.

In the camp campers learn many basic but fundamental and important lessons like understanding, sharing, caring, loving etc. which are very helpful in their personal as well social development. My heartily congratulations to all the volunteers, directors, counselors and campers to make this camp very successful and strong each and every year!!!

Pravin Vyas

Souvenir compiled by

Sharad Amin and Vijay Pallod;

Edited by Beth Kulkarni;

Designed by Seshadri Kumar

Hindu Heritage Camp



Maneesh Mehra was the first youth director of the Hindu Heritage Camp. He met his future wife, Niharika first time at the camp. "The Hindu Heritage Camp is a fantastic opportunity for kids to learn and grow together. The camp clearly achieves this goal. One of the Directors this year, Nikita Malani, used to be an elementary group camper when I was a counselor!" says Niharika. Above, Maneesh and Niharika Mehra with son Rohit.



Children celebrate Holi during a recent Hindu Heritage Camp.

In the eyes of a young camp director

By **NIKITA MALANI**

This year is the 25th anniversary of the Hindu Heritage Camp.

Being one of the directors of camp for this momentous year made me think about my own experiences at camp, as both a camper and counselor.

I have been attending camp since I was in the 2nd grade. My family has been involved with the camp since before I was born.

The camp was always my favorite week of the year. It was a chance to see old friends, make new ones, all the while learning about my culture and religion.

It was also really great to have counselors that I was able to relate to and talk to about my own experiences as a Hindu in America. Many of these counselors are my role models to this day.

By going to school in America, we learn to mix with people of all backgrounds and get exposure to many cultures. While this is important, it is also important to spend time learning more about our own Indian culture, and what makes it so special.

We get an opportunity here at camp to focus on these values in an atmosphere that feels like one big family.

Holi, garba, kabaddi- these are not things you normally associate with Houston, Texas.

The camp is a great place to be able to participate in activities that we normally would only get to do back in India. These are some of my most fun memories of growing up and know the bonds they helped to create with some of my best friends.

When I began college, I realized that it was my turn to be a role model for the next generation of campers.

I have been a counselor for the past 3 years and this experience has been even more rewarding than being a camper. Being able to interact with younger kids and teach them about their heritage is a privilege. Every year, the questions and insightfulness of the campers allows me think about my religion in new and unique ways.

Nikita graduated from University of Pennsylvania and now she is going to Baylor College of Medicine. She is the daughter of Raj and Jugal Malani.



Hindu Heritage Camp

Perspective From a Euro-American Hindu

As a Hindu who is a Euro-American, I often have a slightly different viewpoint than most of my fellow Hindus.

And probably that extends to my view of the Houston Hindus' Hindu Heritage Youth Camp.

I have been involved with the camp for a number of years. And as an elder member of the local Hindu community, I am still taking some part in the "background".

I have attended camp as an adult member of the camp staff, I have helped in the kitchen and in serving food, I have helped to publicize camp and, on occasion I have spoke briefly to the campers and the parents at the closing ceremony.

It pleases me greatly that the campers I knew a number of years ago, in some cases, about fifteen or twenty years ago, are now the counselors and the directors of the camp.

The counselors and directors who are serving the Hindu community by this volunteer service have first-hand experience of the benefits of going to a Hindu camp.

Their knowledge and their self esteem have grown due to their camp experiences both as campers and now as camp counselors. The friendships they have made in camp have been enduring ones.

One of the strong points of the Houston Hindu Heritage Youth Camp is that it has always been a camp which has diversity in its participants. Campers come from families which attend different temples and participate in different activities within and outside the Hindu community. They speak many different Indian languages or none at all.

But despite their differences, they come together at camp to learn more about Hindu traditions including festivals, folk dances, Indian history, traditional Indian games and arts and crafts which combine the old and the new.

But, to me, the most important part about the camp experience, is not what the campers learn or what the counselors learn in preparing for camp sessions, but what the campers gain in self-confidence and self-esteem.

Through being with other Hindu young people, they learn that their families and their traditions are

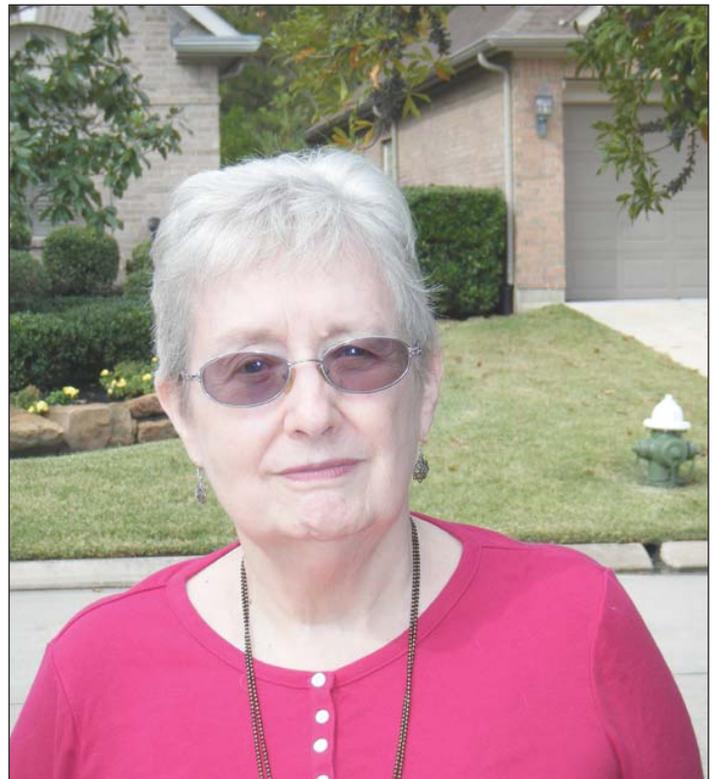
similar to many others. They learn from their camp experiences that despite the different backgrounds of the campers, there is more to unify them than divides them.

The lesson of "Unity in Diversity" is one that campers learn from their camp experiences and which is an important life lesson.

My hope is that the campers will be from an even wider range of backgrounds in the future and that "Unity in Diversity" will continue to be a well-learned lesson.

Although I will be unable to attend the camp sessions this year due to a previously planned activity, I send my best wishes and blessings to all.

—Beth Kulkarni



Beth Kulkarni who retired from BP in 1999 has been an active member of the Houston Hindu Community for over three decades. She is currently a founding member and secretary of the executive committee of Hindu Temple of The Woodlands. She remains active in a number of organizations, especially in the areas of communications and education.

Hindu Heritage Camp

July 29, 2006

IN SEARCH OF THEIR HERITAGE

Summer camp for Hindu kids blends fun, spiritual instruction; An exercise in religion

By BARBARA KARKABI

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RICHMOND -- The American teens in shorts and jeans eagerly questioned the Hindu holy man in saffron-colored robes.

"Swami," a young man said, "in Texas people say if you don't believe in Jesus Christ you will go to hell.

In Islam they say there is only (one) God. How do you answer those people when they talk to you like that?"

And how, a young girl asked, do they explain Hinduism and its many traditions to others?

Swami Vidyadhishananda Giri's answer was swift and direct. "There are many paths to God," he said. "God is one, knowledge is one. The very basic teachings are universal. You cannot lose your inner strength, even if someone provokes you."

Stress the values you learned growing up as a Hindu, he said. It's a message of love, harmony and tolerance. "Ultimately you will make an impact."

The swami, who earned a doctorate in neurobiology in California and spent the past four years meditating in the Himalayas, has been called a bridge between East and West. His visit to the Hindu Heritage Youth Camp was a highlight for the 151 kids who turned out last week for the five-day experience.

Ranging in age from 7 to 18, all but a handful came from the Houston area. The swami, "45 in this body," divides his time between his native India and California.

"It's hard, sometimes, for the kids to find a resource who can really answer any questions they have about our religion," said camp director Alok Kanojia, 23.

Kanojia, like most of the 25 young counselors, is a former camper. He first attended at age 6 and, in his early years, viewed Hindu camp as just a fun time with friends. But as he got older, Kanojia began to understand the value of what he was learning about his religion and culture.

He and the other counselors, all volunteers, hope to

pass those values on to younger campers. They want to help them feel comfortable as Hindus, a religious minority living in a predominantly Christian culture.

"As Swami Giri said, if you have a strong moral character, good things will happen for you," said Kanojia, a University of Texas graduate from Beaumont. "It's the techniques that we teach them at camp, like yoga and meditation tools to help them deal with the stress of studying and daily life."

But the camp is not just about exploring beliefs and values. It's also about fun, making new friends and, for some, suffering an occasional broken heart.

At the 112-acre Gordon Ranch, kids swim, ride on paddle boats, play American and Indian games, learn about yoga, perform skits, have talent shows and take part in arts and crafts.

Two of the most popular activities are holi, an uninhibited celebration of spring in which colored powder and water are thrown on friends and family, and garba-raas, a celebratory dance.

"It's a folk dance," explained Anjali Dhingra, 15, of Friendswood.

"We all get dressed up in our Indian clothes, and everyone looks so pretty. The younger kids have been learning the dance all week, but they are shy. When they see us dancing they all join in, and in the end, everyone is dancing away. It's so much fun."

Dhingra has gone to Hindu camp for five years. Over a vegetarian lunch with friends, she discussed the swami's talk and how well he understood their lives and the daily challenges.

"What's good about the education session is that when you are young they start with the basics," she said. "Now that we get older the talks are much deeper, and we get into things like ethics, self-empowerment and goals."

Camp begins early. Wake-up prayers begin at 6:45 a.m., and by 7:15 all campers are expected to be on the playground, standing in straight lines, organized by age and grade.

Dillon Rama, 10, a visitor from Louisville, Ky., wishes they could sleep until 10 a.m. But 7-year-old Ekta Suri from Missouri City, with long dark hair and twinkling eyes, politely disagrees.

"I like to feel the dew on the ground," she said.

See next page

Hindu Heritage Camp

The next 15 minutes are spent at the daily shakha, an Indian activity that includes prayers and songs, followed by 30 minutes of physical fitness, yoga and games. It's a way, counselors say, to encourage life-long health habits.

Placing her hands together, counselor Sujata Amin, 19, sings several prayers in Hindi that ask Ganesh, a symbol of good fortune, for a good day.

That's followed by the camp song, Dharti ki Shaan. Every person is great, they sing, but the strong should help the weak.

Older campers place their hands together and join in; younger campers follow along from printed song sheets. "Om shanti, shanti, shanti," they chant, calling for peace. Later, the high-school students begin their yoga session. They are working on a position known as suyra namaskar, or the sun salutation, a yoga exercise that includes 10 positions and is considered one of the best exercises for the body.

"We are here to help them achieve their full capacity both physically and mentally," said Sharad Amin, one of the founders of the 21-year-old camp sponsored by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad of America, part of the World Hindu Council.

"And slowly, they are molded."

"The counselors rock," 10-year-old Shivam Dave said. He especially liked the skits and talent shows.

"I love learning about the Hindu heritage, the different symbols and what they mean, how Eastern and Western medicine can be combined and what the orange flag stands for."

Kavita Parekh has learned about karma this summer. "Indian people really believe in it," the 9-year-old from Victoria said. "Basically, if you do something bad, it will come back to you 10 times worse. But if you do something good, it will come back 10 times better."

Anuj Mittal, 16, sits back and watches. He is taking a break and waiting for lunch. "What I like is that it's so family oriented. I feel right at home." Mittal has been a camper for five years. Like many of his fellow campers, he plans to be a counselor and carry on the tradition.

That pleases Kanojia and his friend Ronak Shah, 24.

Shah, a camper for 10 years, then a counselor and finally the camp co-director in 2004, laughs as he describes himself as one of the worst-behaved campers. But his dedication is clear.

"The main thing is to inspire them," Shah said, "and plant the seeds for later in life."



Barbara Karkabi, seated, center, of Houston Chronicle talks to camp organizers during the 2006 Hindu Heritage Camp.

Hindu Heritage Camp

When our children were growing up, we as parents had a challenge: how to bring some of our cultural values in them. Normally children do not tend to listen to parents as much as they do to friends and others. Luckily, the first opportunity came from the establishment of Arya Samaj that was nearby our house.

Our children, Anupma, Anuradha and Abhishek, then junior high students, were the very first students of Arya Samaj's Sunday School.

At Arya Samaj they started learning some cultural values, However, they did not accept other values such as vegetarianism. As they used to eat meat for school lunches, we had no way to control that and left that decision to them.

During this period, I came to know about the week-long VHP-A children's camp. Having the children away for a full week was not easy, yet we decided to let all three of them go to the camp, thinking that at least they will all be together in the same area. At the end of the week, we went to the camp to bring our children back home. They appeared to be happy and that was sufficient for our happiness.

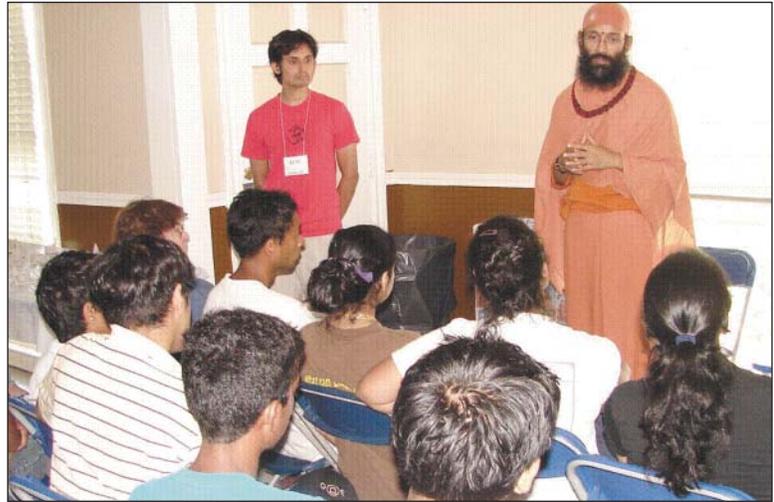
On our way back to home, our older daughter Anupma broke the news to us. They all had decided to give up eating any kind of meats.

Delighted, yet with some apprehension, we asked them if there was any compulsion imposed upon them by any one at the camp. Their answer was "no".

The values and Sanskars taught at the camp made them realize that humans are not biologically suited to eating meat. We thought that this change might be a short-lived one, but were glad that they would experience vegetarianism. As the time passed, our children went to high school and then to college.

It is a matter of pride for us to know that they kept their commitment and they are all still vegetarians. They also teach their friends the benefits of being vegetarian. That was the only camp session they attended, but this camp taught them life-long values. We are pleased that they are keeping their values and shall pass on to their children when they are parents.

- Vijay & Ashok Dhingra



Alok Kanoji, camp director, with Swami Vidyadishanandha Giri

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ex-Bhutanese Hindu brethren need your help!



80,000 Bhutanese refugees still live in makeshift camps in Nepal. Many of them will be coming to the USA soon.



Left, youngsters of Bhutanese families visiting a Hindu temple in Cleveland. Right, Bhutanese worshipers at a temple in New Hampshire. The visits were arranged by Sewa International in cooperation with the temple and local organizations.



Left, volunteers assist refugees at a job fair and training session organized by SEWA International. Right, Bhutanese families worshipping at a temple in Sacramento during a visit organized by SEWA in cooperation with the temple.

1992, the ouster. For purposes of ethnic cleansing, Bhutan summarily expelled its entire Lhotshampas population (mostly Hindu) 17 years ago. Most of them took refuge in Nepal where they have lived in squalid camps ever since.

The USA opens its doors. In 2008-2009, the USA offered refuge to this displaced people. So far, under a UN-approved migration plan, 15,000 have arrived and another 45,000 are expected within the next four years.

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