

'A close-knit group'

Camp

Kids of Deaf Adults Camp inspires families, members of deaf community

Caurie Putnam Special to Rochester Democrat and Chronicle USA TODAY NETWORK

Lisa Wilson of Pittsford never thought she'd move back to Rochester after graduating from the National Technical Institute for the Deaf: RIT. The winters were just too much.

Then Wilson, who is deaf, had children.

"You just can't find this anywhere," said Wilson, sitting at a picnic table at Powder Mills Park in Pittsford while her son Rye, 5, played with a large group of other children whose parents are deaf.

The kids were part of the 2018 KODA & Deaf Camp sponsored by Deaf Events Among Families (DEAF) Circle at Powder Mills Park in Pittsford from Aug. 13 to 17.

KODA stands for "Kids of Deaf Adults" and all of the children at the Pittsford-based camp were ages 5 to 10. One of the 23 campers was deaf, and the others were hearing.

The camp was run using both spoken language and American Sign Language (ASL).

See **CAMP**, Page **15A**

"A lot of deaf friends back in Ohio tell us how lucky we are to live in such a supportive community. This camp is important for these kids to help them identify who they are and to give them their own space."

Christopher Knigga

a Pittsford parent



Kieran Sommer of Pittsford leads campers in an activity at the 2018 KODA & Deaf Camp that was held this week at Powder Mills Park in Pittsford. CAURIE PUTNAM



JB McNichols III was one of the 23 campers ages 5 to 10 at the KODA & Deaf Camp sponsored by Deaf Events Among Families (DEAF) Circle at Powder Mills Park in Pittsford. CAURIE PUTNAM

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Continued from Page 1A

“In other states, most kids don’t have an experience like this until they’re at least eight if they have one at all,” said Wilson, who lived in California and Massachusetts before moving to Pittsford a few years ago. “Here in Rochester, kids can get the experience at age five and find their identity as KODA sooner.”

Three years in

This was the educational day camp’s third year. It was founded by Adrianna Smart of Macedon, in part because there is nothing else like it in western New York.

The nearest camp for children of deaf parents is Camp Mark Seven KODA Camp in Old Forge, Herkimer County. However, that one is an overnight camp and campers must be at least eight to attend.

“The KODA community in Rochester is very large, so we knew it would be worth it to do here,” said Smart, who is the executive director of DEAF Circle, formerly named the Rochester Deaf Mother’s Club.

Families move to Rochester

Smart, who has children ages 8 and 6, runs the camp with co-executive director Carrie Fisher of Pittsford, who has kids ages 8 and 2. In addition to traditional camp activities, like kickball and crafts, they bring in storytellers and presenters that educate campers about deaf culture and ASL.

“We used to get our kids together a lot as babies for playdates,” Fisher said. “As they got older we felt it was very, very important to have this camp here in Rochester. People move here from other states because of opportunities like this.”

Christopher Knigga, also of Pittsford, is a prime example. He and his wife are from Ohio but chose to move to Rochester to raise their children Mason, 7, and Lia, 4.

Knigga believes that Rochester has one of the largest deaf populations.

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Rochester “is believed to have” one of the largest per capita deaf and hard-of-hearing populations in the country, according to the National Technical Institute for the Deaf at Rochester Institute of Technology. It is tough to ascertain world population statistics, and the census doesn’t track that information.

A *Democrat and Chronicle* report estimated 19,438 deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals younger than 65 lived in the region in 2012 with several thousand more over 65 — but that was six years ago. NTID doesn’t use those figures today, Susan L. Murad, an NTID director and spokesperson, wrote via email on Friday. She was not able to provide more current statistics.

A special bond

Many of Rochester’s parents who are deaf or hard of hearing and have hearing children — or KODAs — are very familiar with KODA Camp and many have children who started out as campers and then became counselors as they grew up.

“It’s very popular among the Rochester Deaf community,” Murad said. That includes camp counselors. All of the counselors at KODA & Deaf Camp are also children of deaf parents, including the co-directors Dara Doane and Kieran Sommer, both college students from Pittsford.

“All my life growing up I felt a disconnect with my non-KODA friends,” said Sommer, who attends Canisius College. “A subtle difference, for example, is that when your parents are deaf, you need that eye contact with them when you talk. When I talk with my hearing friends they don’t always look me in the eye, but my KODA friends always do.”

Doane, who attends American University, agrees that there is a special bond between children of parents who are deaf.

“We’re a really close-knit group,” Doane said. “This camp is awesome because it encourages kids to embrace their KODA identity.”

Sydney Furman-Sanger, 9, of Pittsford is doing just that. The daughter of two parents who are deaf, she has attended all three years of KODA & Deaf Camp. Her favorite camp activities are Olympics Day, games and eating cotton candy.

Above all, though, she loves the friends she’s made.

“I like how there are so many other KODAs,” Furman- Sanger said. “We all share our experiences at this camp. I love all my friends so much, but my KODA friends have a different look at things.”

Learn more

For more information on KODA & Deaf Camp run by Deaf Events Among Families (DEAF) Circle (formerly called the Rochester Deaf Mother’s Club) — email rocdeafkodacamp@gmail.com, visit deafcirlce.com or go to Rochester Deaf Mothers Club on Facebook. The camp is open to hearing children whose parents/grandparents who are deaf and to children who are deaf or hard of hearing.

Cynthia Benjamin contributed to this story. Caurie Putnam is a community columnist and a freelance writer living in Brockport.

An arts and craft project from the 2018 KODA & Deaf Camp sponsored by Deaf Events Among Families (DEAF) Circle at Powder Mills Park in Pittsford. CAURIE PUTNAM

Teira Jeremy watches counselor Chloe Miller sign at the 2018 KODA & Deaf Camp sponsored by Deaf Events Among Families Circle at Powder Mills Park in Pittsford. CAURIE PUTNAM
