

THE DAILY NEWS

Life-changing: Campfire singing at Camp Everytown

BY ANDREW LIU

Tuesday, December 15, 2009

Special to The Daily News

It was a heartwarming and unusual sight: Gunn High School students, teachers and Silicon Valley community members, all suffused with happiness, were holding hands and singing the Black Eyed Peas' "Where is the Love?" around a campfire. This is just one telling vignette of the close-knit community created in the Santa Cruz Mountains during the annual Camp Everytown, a four-day retreat for high schoolers that tackles stereotypes and bias and fosters honest communication.

At Camp Everytown, activities include a large group discussion of prejudice, small group conversations, singing, campfires and skits, all oriented to reveal how intimately and severely social barriers affect students and adults alike, even in a place as tolerant as Palo Alto.

Although many Silicon Valley high schools participate in Camp Everytown, it is considered a privilege at Gunn to be selected as one of the 80 students who get to go. Many agree that Everytown is a life-changing and emotional experience, but it is difficult to pin down how exactly it affects all participants so dramatically. For some, it is about dispelling negative prejudices and painting their impacts on society in their true, appalling form— the social dividers that lead to ignorance and violence.

For others, the experience is about opening up and communicating honestly with people who understand and empathize instead of judge.

For me, Everytown not only opened my eyes to the inequalities around us, but also provided me with the rare courage to enact change. In the process, we all created new bonds and strengthened existing ones with both students and teachers.

Neil Sood, a junior, commented that Everytown was "one of the best experiences of my life."

The impact of Everytown, however, goes beyond the individual. One crux of the program is to inspire the students who attend to bring back the message of tolerance to their schools.

Whether through leadership by example or by raising awareness in school, homes and friend circles, these students have to find the courage to break down the barriers that separate groups and push for social justice. Everytown is often credited with decreasing violence in communities and raising respect in multicultural atmospheres.

At Gunn, there is large belief that Everytown has made for a more tolerant environment.

The bus back from Camp Everytown last Saturday was full of emotion. Most of us— students and teachers —were ecstatic, singing together and bonding with the friends we had met a mere three days prior. There was also nostalgia for the tight group that we were leaving behind and unease about the reality of social barriers we would face upon return. But beneath it all, every one of us had to take the time to process both the joyous and eye-opening experiences of those soul-searching days. We all hope that we can overcome the challenges ahead and spread our message to everyone in our reach.

Andrew Liu is a junior and the senior editor of Gunn High School's political and cultural newspaper, The Chariot, a monthly publication that presents opposing views on current events, government policy and school culture