

SUMMER SHANGRI-LA
by John T. McCarthy, M.D. June 3, 2013

Dateline: July 1st, 1953, The Bronx New York. At 7 AM sharp, on what looked like another hot summer day we 3 brothers prepared to take the D-Train Subway to Grand Central Station with our parents. Destination: Camp Marist on the shores of Lake Ossipee, New Hampshire, hundreds of miles from our home. To get there, we first boarded a large commuter train at Grand Central Station and transported 150 miles Northeast to Union Station in Boston, Massachusetts where a waiting coach bus whisked us away, about 100 miles North to our destination: Camp Marist. We arrived exhausted and hungry in the late afternoon. We couldn't believe our eyes. The seemingly endless trek to camp was over. Camp Marist exceeded our wildest expectations. From our city slicker viewpoint, we had died and gone to heaven. This became our Summer "Shangri-La" for the next 7 seasons.

It was staffed almost solely by Marist Brothers, some who taught at Mount St. Michael Academy, our school for the past year. In fact, my very first cabin counselor, Brother Francis Gerard ("Izzy"), had been my 4th grade teacher. He had rescued me from academic oblivion the past academic year by teaching me the 3 Rs and had awarded me the class English Medal. As I think back on it, I owed him much. Although hard of hearing, Brother Francis spoke softly and effectively used a wooden clicker to restore order and get us pupils back on track. Well, as my Cabin 4 Counselor, he proved equally effective and eased my transition to sleepover camp life. My previous experience with camp life the summer of 1952 when I was only 9, had been pretty bumpy due in part to not knowing anyone, neither counselors nor campers except my brothers who were assigned different cabins. This was Camp Chicagami nestled in the Pocono Mountains of Pennsylvania. Life here paled in comparison to the following season at Camp Marist.

Our Camp Marist Director, Brother Benedict Henry, a gentle giant of a man, designed and organized a camp season program that maintained our interest throughout the 8 week summer season including sports, arts and crafts, swimming, canoeing, water skiing, riflery, archery, hiking, excursions, and evening entertainment. Excursions became a vital part of camp life and usually involved one cabin at a time. We climbed Mount Chochura with the encouraging words of a chubby Brother Fillbert, "Five minutes more", he'd say gasping for air; we swam and picnicked at White Mountain State Park Lake; rode a ski-mobile up Mount Cranmore; toured breathtaking Franconia Notch and The Flume; visited the "Old Man in the Mountain" before he really got old and fell off the mountain; and turned purple in the frigid Atlantic Ocean waters at Old Orchard Beach, Maine. By the end of each day, we plopped into bed and sound asleep within a nano-second. Fortunately, most days were sunny, warm, crisp, nearly humidity-free with well-timed rain. Hearty meals were served in the giant Mess Hall where Bug Juice was the beverage of choice. Cabins were assigned according to age. Campers under 10 occupied the smaller Cabins 1 through 3, whereas, the larger Cabins 4 through 9 had campers from 10 through 15. For some odd reason, the oldest lived in Cabin 8. Although Peter and I were never assigned the same cabin, Jimmy and me were after the first season until the last in 1959 when 5 of us campers were designated Senior Campers. Most campers hailed

from the steamy Big Apple of New York City. Only a few got homesick. We welcomed letters and packages from home. One of my favorite camp Chaplains was Father William Denos who became a priest after a full career in Engineering and a married man whose wife had died. He was so approachable and non-judgmental especially when I went to him for confession. Nothing I told him seemed to shock him as he sucked patiently on his aromatic pipe and listened intently.

One of the nicest things about Camp Marist was its open door family visitation policy which my parents loved. Often, they chose to drive up to Camp Marist about 7-10 days before the end of the season and then took us on another vacation to places like Damariscotta, Maine, Hyannis, Cape Cod, and Riverhead, Long island. Sending us to Camp Marist probably saved our parents' marriage. I'm sure the nearly 2 months we were away at camp, undoubtedly restored their sanity and partially explained why they chose to extend their vacation with us at the end of the camp season. I remember the time we went to Hyannis on Cape Cod and I got a bad dose of Poison ivy not knowing it initially. When my face swelled up, Peter and Jimmy, with parental collusion, accused me of having "Blowfish Disease" due to improper handling of some Puffer Fish I had caught. Horrified, I hid in shame covered in Calamine Lotion and refused to go to church on Sunday with my family. How gullible I was!

While at Camp Marist, we 3 Bronxites, maintained our passion for nature and wildlife. We assembled a sizeable menagerie that included snakes, toads, frogs, fish and turtles which we contributed to the Camp's Nature Center run by our Mount St. Michael French Canadian Prefect, Brother Andrew Bernard. Not fully content with sharing, Jimmy somehow managed to build a cage hidden in the woods behind our cabin to house selected wildlife. Once he even had visions of trapping and caging a Raccoon. Good thing it wasn't a skunk.

In our 3rd season at Camp Marist, Jimmy and I tried out for and made the Baseball Team headed by Brother Tim, the affable and knowledgeable coach. At first, we rode the bench but eventually we got to play more regularly and loved it. Initially an Outfielder, Brother Tim groomed me to be a somewhat respectable Catcher and Jimmy a power-hitting infielder. Each week we played against rival camps in the area including Camps Calumet, Robin Hood, and Lake Winnepesaukee (they had great dugouts). By the end of the 1957 season, I won the 1 IVP Trophy and Jimmy was so honored the following season. Both trophies now sit in my home today as my brother Jimmy died in 2007.

In my 5th season at Camp Marist, circa 1957, age 13, I ended up in Cabin 8 with my brother Jimmy (the previous season we had been in Cabin 9 and referred to as the "Hilltoppers with Brother Giles as the perennial Counselor). Most of the campers were veterans of Camp Marist but there were still some rookies. One kid especially drew my attention: Brian Flanagan. He looked very familiar. "Where had I seen that kid before?", I asked myself. I wracked my adolescent brain and then like a thunderbolt it hit me. "Hey", I exclaimed confidently, your that kid Pud on 'Let's Take a Trip' with Sonny Fox on TV, I had blown his cover. Sheepishly, he confessed that I had correctly figured out who he was. He revealed that before coming to Camp Marist, he had been replaced by

another boy because he was too old for the show. So had his partner, Ginger McManus. Soon Pud blended in with the rest of us campers in Cabin 8 and we virtually never talked about his previous claim to fame. He turned out to be as nice as he had seemed on TV in sharp contrast to Ginger who came across as snobbish. Anyhow, many of us teen campers enjoyed our status as top dogs and returned the following year for a repeat performance including Brian "Pug" Flanagan. I often wondered what became of Pud in his adult years but have no doubts that he would have made his way.

Of course, I had many memorable and funny moments as a camper. Somehow, one season we in Cabin 8 learned sign language which we used to great advantage during rest period right after lunch when we were supposed to be lying on our beds napping or writing letters in silence. So we became impish loopers and used sign language to communicate with each other to great advantage. This eventually caused giggling which got the attention of our befuddled counselor who caught us red handed. Under pain of mortal sin, he banned us for life from using sign language again. We feared that should we die with such a mortal sin, we would go straight to the eternal fires of hell. Such crazy guilt tripping as it fortunately tamed out.

In my last season at Camp Marist, 1959, five of us were designated as Senior Campers and provided separate quarters adjacent to the Chapel and across from the Rec Hall. Brother Simeon was our Ex officio Counselor. My brother, Jimmy, stayed in Cabin 8. Our main job was working in the Mess Hall before and after the 3 meals each day. The rest of the time we were free to choose what to do. In the Mess Hall I developed a dubious distinction as an excellent pot scrubber gained no doubt from all my dishwashing experience at home growing up. I caught the eye of the Camp's Chef, The Mad Hungarian, Julius who tried to woo me to join his crew in the kitchen for the 1960 season. Fortunately, my dad nixed such plans. As Senior Campers, we enjoyed certain privileges and freedoms once our work was done. After we had cleaned up the Mess Hall after supper, we were allowed to entertain ourselves. So as budding adolescents, we ventured down the road 1/2 mile to The English's Motel and Campground. There, they had a cozy lounge where we could hang out, play pinball, order pizza, and most importantly, flirt with English's 2 daughters, Elaine 15, and Rosmarie, nearly 12. Sonny, their 18 year old brother, kept a protective eye on us. Bob "Sully" Sullivan worked his charms on the elder daughter, while I went ga-ga over pixie-ish Rosemarie. Our harmless summer crushes as it turned out even though I gave Rosemarie a small cedar chest with her name engraved bought at Old Orchard Beach. Other evenings, when we had a bad case of the munchies, we hatched a plot to raid the Mess Hall's storeroom. One feverish kid in our group, originally nicknamed, John Clammy Hands Finnegan for his nervous wet fish handshake, decided that he would singlehandedly haul away a whole gigantic watermelon. Well, instead, "Clammy hands" in his haste to make a getaway, fatally fumbled the melon and it crashed to the ground and broke into a gazillion pieces. From then on he became known as "Butterfingers".

Once I remember as Senior Campers, during rest period, we dared Johnny "Don't call me 4 eyes" Miller to run to the Rec. Hall and run back nude without getting caught for the \$50 pot we wagered. And lo and behold, streaking Johnny won! It seemed that after

this, staking became all the rage in America and I wondered if we had anything to do with this craze. I saw very little of my brothers during the summer of 1959 because they were still regular campers but I think they were finally in the same Cabin 8 together.

I was really sad when my last season came to an end. And although Peter and Jimmy were eligible for another season or two, it was also to be their last as well. As July 1, 1960 dawned, I realized that we would never be going as campers again to Camp Marist. It was the end of our Summer Shangri-la. Brother Ben stepped down as Camp Director as we turned our summer pursuits to other arenas in the melting streets of The Bronx. I've often wondered if Camp Marist has ever had any reunions as I've happily had for the schools I've attended over the years including Medical School. Perhaps they will. Stay tuned.