

# DAROM · POCONOS · WISCONSIN

## ERIC SINGER

Founding President, Camp Ramah Darom

[Interview conducted by Rabbi Mitchell Cohen, National Ramah Director, July 2007.]

**E**ach summer, the National Ramah Commission's Executive Committee (camp presidents and NRC officers) meets at the beginning of July at a Ramah camp to conduct business, share best practices, and get to know the facility, program, and personnel of another local Ramah camp. In 2007, we met at Camp Ramah Darom in Clayton, Georgia, and in addition to the usual meetings, we had the opportunity to meet for a few hours with the Ramah Darom board of directors to share perspectives and to introduce some of the challenges and innovations at Ramah camps throughout North America.

One of the founding members of the Ramah Darom board, and its first president, is Eric Singer, who spent Shabbat at camp with our group. In an hour-long conversation, he shared his story on the founding of Ramah Darom with me—a story that inspired me.

Eric's Ramah roots are deep. He grew up in Columbus, Georgia, in a small Jewish community. In the 1950s, Eric's parents were urged by their congregational rabbi, Kass Abelson, to send his two older sisters, Sharon and Alice, to Ramah camps up north. Alice attended Camp Ramah in Connecticut, and Sharon attended Camp Ramah in the Poconos, where she met her future husband, Neil Norry of Rochester. (Neil and Sharon's children and grandchildren have a long and wonderful legacy of attendance at numerous Ramah camps, as well as generosity toward the building and sustaining of Ramah in many settings.)

Eventually it was Eric's turn to experience Ramah. Together with David Abelson, the rabbi's son, Eric attended Camps Ramah in Wisconsin and the Poconos between 1962 and 1967 and attended the Ramah Israel Seminar in 1968. In 1969, Eric continued his career with Ramah by working on the waterfront at Wisconsin, where he was supervised by the head of swimming, Mort Steinberg, who later became the president of Ramah in Wisconsin and eventually the president of the National Ramah Commission.

Eric describes his years at Ramah as transformative.

I grew up in a small Jewish community, and for the first time I was exposed to the religiosity of Ramah, which had a huge impact on my life. Our counselors spoke mostly Hebrew to us, and it was great. I learned so much from this experience, which sustained me throughout my life. We learned that it was cool to be Jewish—we could focus not only on sports, but on Jewish life as well, and still have a great time. At Ramah we learned that it was okay to do both.

Eric said that one day at Ramah he had an epiphany.

I learned to love the outdoors at camp. At the time, I thought I would become a forest ranger, but my passion was to turn on other people to the beauty of experiencing the outdoors. That became a lifetime passion for me. School didn't have a great impact on me, but experiential education, especially at Ramah, made a huge difference in my life in two ways. It helped me develop a strong Jewish identity and instilled within me a deep love for nature and the outdoors.

True to his dream that was born at Ramah, Eric attended the National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS) and eventually became a NOLS instructor. He moved to Alaska, where he became an outdoors adventure guide, eventually becoming the president of the Alaska Guides Association. Eric got married, and together he and his wife raised three children in Atlanta, all of whom attended Ramah either in New England or at Darom. "Ramah had a wonderful impact on all my kids, but it was nothing like the impact that it had on me, because I came from such a small Jewish community. My kids grew up in Atlanta, where there are many Jewish kids and many Jewish opportunities."

Little did Eric realize, while living in Alaska, that he would later have the opportunity to help realize the dream of creating the same camping experience for thousands of Jewish children in the southeastern United States that was so central to his growth as an outdoor educator and as a Jew. The beginning of his involvement came in 1996, when he received a phone call from Neal Schnall,

his old friend from Ramah in the Poconos and Wisconsin. Neal was living in Los Angeles, had been very involved with Camp Ramah in California, and knew the National Ramah Director, Rabbi Shelly Dorph, very well. "He told me about a new venture to create Ramah Darom here in the south, and I knew this had my name written all over it," Eric recalled. Ironically, Eric's father, Sol Singer, had been instrumental in trying to create a Camp Ramah for the South decades earlier. In 1956, as part of a United Synagogue effort, Sol Singer had been involved in conducting a feasibility study to create a Camp Ramah in the region, but it would be decades before this would become a reality.

In 1996 Eric immediately became involved in the efforts to build Ramah Darom, and he recalls a historic meeting in Charlotte, North Carolina, where interested parties from synagogues throughout the South gathered with great enthusiasm for Ramah. Although he describes some political squabbling over potential control of the camp's board, the grassroots enthusiasts from congregations in many southern states wouldn't let the effort be derailed. "The smartest thing the National Ramah Commission did was give us a deadline and a challenge grant," Eric recalls. "They instilled within us the urgency to identify leadership, foster a grassroots movement, and create a structure for local ownership." Eric continued:

Every project needs a meshuggener and an angel. I guess I became the meshuggener, and Bubba Mitchell became the angel. We also wouldn't have been successful without the incredible efforts of Lynda Walker, our project manager. The three of us working together were the starting point, and then others joined in and helped create Ramah Darom.

After a site was identified, a board was created, and the fund-raising efforts really took off. "By late 1996, we were determined to open this camp in six months for the 1997 summer season, and we had to get everything built in the face of El Niño weather," he recalled. But build it they did, and under the professional leadership of Rabbi Loren Sykes, Camp Ramah Darom opened its inaugural season in 1997. Today it serves over 950 campers and 200 staff members each summer. Additionally, Ramah Darom runs an outstanding retreat program year-round, including a Passover Institute and a conference for Hillel leadership. In recent years, Ramah Darom has pioneered the inspiring Camp Yofi, a family camp program for families with children with autism.

With all the success, Eric hopes that Ramah Darom will grow to even greater heights, particularly with regard to outdoor education and year-round usage.

By all accounts, the first ten years of Ramah Darom have been enormously successful, positively impacting the lives of thousands of young people,

giving them the same kinds of experiences that had such a positive impact on Eric during his youth.

Helping to build this camp is one of the most important experiences of my life. Wherever I go, people express appreciation for this camp, and that is extremely satisfying. How many times do you get a chance to do something like this, to build something that will influence so many people?

As we concluded the interview, we both smiled at the powerful reminiscences and discussed the current efforts underway to build yet another Camp Ramah, this time in the Rocky Mountains of Colorado. Getting to know Eric and his life's story, I can't help but wonder who will emerge as the Eric Singer in Colorado, the meshuggener of the Rockies!