



Darrien Sherman surrounded by new Ukrainian friends

Ramah Magic

Detroiter staffs Ukraine trip; finds remarkable similarities.

Darrien Sherman | Special to the Jewish News

Native Detroiter Darrien Sherman has worked in the Ramah Detroit Davidson Fellowship program for three years. She spent many summers at Camp Ramah in Canada as a camper and staff member. From July 28-Aug. 10, she co-led a group of 11 Ramah camper graduates to work at Camp Ramah Yachad, a Jewish summer camp in the Ukraine as part of the Ramah Ukraine Teen Leadership Experience.

After spending two weeks in the Carpathian Mountains at Camp Ramah Yachad in the Ukraine, I realized and appreciated the true power and beauty of Ramah.

We were immediately welcomed by the Ukrainian staff with handshakes, hugs and big smiles. We were the first American delegation to work at Ramah Yachad since it opened 24 years ago. We arrived Friday night before Shabbos and started to pray Kabbalat Shabbat together. Despite being worlds apart, the power of prayer united us.

We were surprised to hear the Ukrainian staff's Ramah trajectory was astonishingly similar to many of ours. A majority of the staff grew up at Camp Ramah Yachad as campers, graduated as *madrachim* (counselors) and continue to return as staff members summer after summer. The counselors led normal lives as doctors, lawyers, accountants and students during the year. When asked why they return each year, they simply replied, "This is their family."

Sitting in a crowded *chadar ochel* (dining room) surrounded by chants and cheers, it was as if we were transported into a typical Ramah chadar ochel.

A handful of the Ramah Yachad campers live in tough economic conditions, and many arrive at camp after a 15-hour train ride. For many of these

campers, this was their only opportunity to receive Jewish education during the year. The discussion topics and the level of Jewish content integrated into each activity reminded me of the *peulot* (activities) I experienced at Ramah as both a camper and staff member.

This sense of family was perfectly demonstrated in the wedding that took place at camp. The groom, a camper and current staff member at Ramah Yachad since age 6, wanted his wedding ceremony to be held at camp in front of his family and friends. It was extraordinary to hear the wedding being translated in three languages — English, Russian and Hebrew. Gila Katz, director of Ramah Yachad, said this wedding was the 10th marriage from camp.

As we sang and danced around the newlyweds, I was blown away by the similarities of Ramah Yachad and our own Ramah camps. I realized the magic of Ramah camps is universal.

As camp came to a close and we were getting onto the bus, the campers started to chant, "U.S.A., U.S.A." They began hugging and kissing our cheeks, writing phone numbers on our arms and squeezing in one last picture. As the bus pulled away from camp, the campers and staff stood waving goodbye. It was a heartfelt moment seeing both sides teary-eyed and blowing air kisses out of the bus windows. A beautiful partnership was created. We realized the impact we had made on one another.

This experience makes me even more proud of my Ramah roots. We are so privileged to be part of a larger network that provides us with plentiful opportunities to practice our Judaism, meet others from different backgrounds with similar interests and to create enduring memories that will last a lifetime. ✨