

Saint Sophia Camp Remembers its Past, while Looking to the Future

By Rebecca Skaggs



Saint Sophia Camp Director Perry Skaggs shows off a sticker with his morning wake-up call.

SYRACUSE, N.Y., Feb. 19, 2019 – “Good morning Saint Sophia Camp!” Perry Skaggs calls out at 7 a.m. like a blaring alarm clock from the lodge at the foot of the hill. “It’s A Beautiful Day” blasts from the speaker and travels through the trees and straight into the cabins. As campers and counselors stumble out of their cabins into the early morning sunlight, Skaggs and the rest of the staff are ready for the start of an exciting new day.

“Saint Sophia Camp is the greater southern California Greek Orthodox youth camping program that creates a place for youth to come together in faith, fun, and fellowship,” said Skaggs, the camp’s director.

Since 1962, the site in Old Waterman Canyon built by parishioners at Saint Sophia Cathedral to develop a camping program that has strengthened a sense of community. Their dream carried on through the perpetuation of the program but in Oct. 2003 shattered by just one act of God.

That month, the San Bernardino mountains were ravaged by wildfires. Heavy rains followed in the later months, resulting in catastrophe for the camp. On Dec. 25, 2003, a mudslide swept across Saint Sophia Camp in Waterman Canyon. The campsite was in ruins with little left of any of the structures. Cabins, the mess hall, and even the basketball courts were torn apart by the sheer force of the mudslide, but the loss of the physical campsite was not the only tragedy. Jorge Monson, the caretaker of the site, his family and friends who were visiting for Christmas, lost their lives in the mudslide too, making the event especially heartbreaking for those deeply involved in the camp.

“After a tragedy, there is only one thing to do, move forward,” said Skaggs. So, that is exactly what they did. Skaggs was brought out of retirement to help the camp in its transition. The camp committee quickly set out to look for a new site for the upcoming year because they knew a delay or lack of program would make it much harder to revive. “It was absolutely imperative that we find a place and we run a program that summer,” said Skaggs.

The committee was able to secure a location, Camp Seely in Crestline, California, by scouting out potential locations, but this was only the first step. Making the new site work to fit the camp’s previous needs proved a challenge. “[Camp Seely] has much smaller cabins holding only about four or five bunks, while we had cabins with eight bunks and large bunk houses with 24 beds in them,” explained Skaggs, leading to an increase in counseling staff.

Another big difference to the program was the reduction of weeks during the summer from four to two weeks. “At our own facility, we used to run four weeks during the summer, but now we are limited to two. Even those two weeks are a blessing because we are the only entity, they give that to, due to what happened to our own facility,” said Skaggs.

Having only two weeks would have been acceptable if the camp had decreased in popularity, but it didn’t. The number of kids who attend each year has been comparable to past

years at around 200 kids a year, but now those numbers are condensed into two weeks, causing a need for more staff and at times, running two separate programs at once for different age groups.

After 16 years, the long quest for a new permanent location has begun. Skaggs explains that the camp is, “currently at the mercy of the facility we rent. Seely could be sold, or they could no longer allow us to do two weeks which would be detrimental to us.”

Skaggs’ sentiments are backed members of the staff and by Father Gary Kyriacou, the head priest for Saint Sophia Camp. “Having our own site gives us the freedom to host our own events and serve as a place where kids can go to be close to nature, God and most importantly each other,” said Kyriacou.

Today, the biggest obstacle is money. “Fundraising is still in infancy. A committee has been formed, but we will need about 5 million. 3 million for the campsite itself and 2 million for renovations,” said Kyriacou. Lack of funds was what held back the church from restoring the old site, leading Saint Sophia to rent out Camp Seely. However, if Seely is no longer an option, it would be hard to see history repeat itself and face the threat of no place to hold camp. Non-profit status is the first step in order to start to be able to raise money. “Saint Sophia is currently in the process of being established as a non-profit organization, so the donations can be received” said Skaggs.

As of right now, Saint Sophia is set to host their 2019 summer camping program at Camp Seely. As the committee moves closer towards its goal of non-profit status, a fundraising plan will be set in place to raise the money. If everything goes as smoothly as it has in the past few months then, in the near future, the early morning sun will shine, and Perry Skaggs can call out “Good morning Saint Sophia Camp!” on the new site for the camp.

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(869 words)