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Where the island's a star

Isles of Shoals retreat fosters contemplation and community

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On a wide boardwalk lined with rocking chairs, Holly Ardito flipped through a dog-eared paperback, arms wrapped around her knees. For five summers, she's retreated to this island to sit and rock and read, to let her daughter play and herself relax.

"She's around here somewhere," Ardito said, leaning forward only briefly to look for Christa. "I heard her voice. I think she's somewhere on the deck."

A child wandering off isn't much of a concern on Star Island; they can only go so far. And parents know they are being watched by the community, by others who return to the haven six miles off the coast of Rye each year and call the place their spiritual home.

"You sleep well. You eat well. You pray well. There aren't a lot of things there that bring you to reality," said Jane Francis, who has vacationed on the island for 15 years. "It's just nice to watch life happen in front of you, to watch the joys of it."

Religious gatherings on Star Island - open to all but attended largely by those from the United Church of Christ and Unitarian Universalist denominations - mirror the denominations' focus on personal enrichment, with a schedule of prayer services, religious seminars, pickup softball games and talent shows that are completely optional. Many will instead spend hours looking out at the ocean from a rocking chair, and they say spirituality is found in that solitude as much as in the candlelight processions to evening chapel.

"It's not merely the notion of getting away and vegetating," said Randall Balmer, a religious scholar from Dartmouth College. "You want to get away and somehow use even that vacation time as a moment for enrichment, for bettering yourself, understanding the world more fully."

Shedding stress

Along the island's edge, water glides up and then back through the low-lying rocks, staining them an inky, golden brown. When Sarah Hauser first attended a Star Gathering, she found herself speed-walking around the border, willing herself into relaxation.

But the stresses from home - a husband who had lost his job and then both his parents within a month of each other - were hard to shed, and Hauser said it wasn't until the day before she

headed back to Connecticut that she felt calm.

"This week I got out here and I gave myself permission to sleep," Hauser said earlier this month as she sat in the island's dining room during her eighth Star Gathering. "The first day, that's all I did was eat and sleep and take naps, and eat some more and take another nap."

On a chalkboard in an adjoining room, someone had written the day's schedule for the main Star Gathering but also for a simultaneous retreat held each year for the teenagers.

Hauser, a member of the Star Island United Church of Christ Board of Directors, is one in a group of volunteers who organize registration and plan the gathering. And while the island only hosts the event, for the week they are here the attendees take a personal ownership of the place.

Families often return for the same week annually, and the gathering feels like a sprawling, 200-person reunion. Food is served family-style, and the ringing of the meal bell pulls those who have scattered around the island together three times a day.

"There is a comfort there, an acceptance there. And we feel that it's all God-centered," said Hauser, "We feel it's all put here for us in a way for us to take and do whatever we want with it. Just enjoy each other's company in kind of a structured way but to the extent that anybody wants to explore."

Long tradition

Star Island - one of nine islands that straddle the border between Maine and New Hampshire and make up the Isles of Shoals - has hosted religious conventions for more than a century.

In the late 1890s, a Unitarian man from Cambridge, Mass., brought his ill wife to the isles in search of healing sea air. Later, he returned with 600 people from his parish and a nearby Congregationalist church.

Vicky Hardy, CEO of the Star Island Corporation, said that when the owners of the island's Oceanic hotel went bankrupt in 1916, the churches purchased the land "with the intent of holding and keeping the island so that other churches and people could come out here for family camp weeks."

"We've been doing it ever since," she said, adding that the island has since evolved to offer not just religious retreats but conferences on topics ranging from photography to international relations.

The now-weathered Oceanic hotel still anchors the island. A wide boardwalk of unsealed wood wraps around the building and connects it to a series of small cottages and dorm-style buildings.

The accommodations are rustic, with showers allowed every few days, thin mattresses on the beds and shared bathrooms at the end of the halls.

But the pastoral quality that many conferees say allows a deeper spiritual experience isn't so

much intentional as a natural consequence of the location, Joe Watts, the general manager, said. The island is off the grid, making electricity, purifying water and maintaining a sewer system independently.

The autonomy, while a challenge for the island's owners, is what sets the place apart from other retreat centers, according to Hardy.

"We are 10 miles out," she said. "You are surrounded by the alpha rhythm of the waves . . . coming at every corner, the ringing of the buoy bells. There is a soothing nature to that atmosphere."

On the last night of the Star Gathering held earlier this month, groups pulled rocking chairs to the boardwalk's railing and looked over the long front lawn where a softball game was being played, the center fielder standing within the stone walls of a small cemetery in the outfield.

One team was made up of island staff, many whom first came here with their families as children. Several marriages have developed from relationships forged on the island, the spouses then returning with their own kids.

"The part about Star Island is it doesn't take a lifetime to become family," said Francis, who was going through a divorce when she first came here and felt a support system materialize around her. "You get what you need. So if you want to be spiritual, you can be spiritual. If you want to laugh . . . you can laugh. If you want to talk about work, you can talk about work. Basically, if you really want to get your needs met, people are there to meet them for you."

The 'green dots'

For newcomers, dubbed "green dots" and distinguishable by a colored sticker on their nametags, the closeness of Star Island can be confusing.

"We feel a little like we stumbled into someone else's family reunion," Cindy Worthington-Berry said as she and her family attended a banquet on the retreat's final night.

A few minutes later, someone grabbed a microphone and announced it was time for "the clap out." Her son Lincoln turned to his father for guidance, but Paul Worthington-Berry just shrugged his shoulders as the entire room started a rhythmic chant.

"We want the baker, the chef and the cook. We want the baker, the chef and the cook," the room repeated while banging their hands on the linen-draped tables.

After a few rounds, the beckoned employees burst through the kitchen door, running down the aisle before a request for another group took over. This time Lincoln began pounding, too. And after dinner, when the 200 conferees gathered on the front lawn for the Grand March, a dance that's been performed at the end of the retreat for some 25 years, the Worthington-Berry's joined in.

The next morning, as the group boarded the boat to Portsmouth, the island's staff had already begun preparing for the upcoming retreat.

When one group leaves, the island becomes someone else's.

"You turn around and you watch the island in the back as you're headed back to Portsmouth, and things aren't that bad," Francis said. "I'm always going to be able to come back here for my solace."

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