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## THE CAMPS ISSUE

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# SUMMER OF SAYING YES

FROM HORSEBACK RIDING TO HIP-HOP, AT CAMP NASHOBA NORTH IT'S ALL ABOUT CHOICE

BY SUSAN AXELROD // PHOTOGRAPHY BY MATT COSBY



**P**ulling in to Camp Nashoba North, the sight of horse barns makes me wish that, instead of being behind the wheel with a notebook, I were in the back seat with a duffel bag, an eager girl being delivered to camp for the summer. The stables are the first buildings a visitor encounters on the camp's nearly 100-acre campus in Raymond, but while the riding program is impressive, it is just one of Nashoba North's many offerings. Campers here—190 boys and girls—are encouraged and expected to try new things. "You could be a soccer star but also want to learn music," says camp director Sarah Seaward. "I think the nice thing about Nashoba is that everything is open to everyone."

Outside her office in the center of the wooded campus, Seaward and I climb aboard a golf cart and bump down the hill toward Crescent Lake, whose sandy beach makes an easy landing spot for campers in kayaks, on paddleboards, and on sailboards coming in to shore. The lake's gradually sloping bottom and warm temperatures make it ideal for water sports and swimming—the only class at Nashoba North that's compulsory, says Seaward. The camp also offers sailing, waterskiing, wake boarding, tubing, and fishing. "We really want kids to get out on the water," Seaward says.

It's mid-August, and Seaward is celebrating her 30th year at Nashoba North. Her family is the third to own the camp, which originated in the early 1920s and had been closed for two years when she and her father, Robert, first saw the property in 1987 as consultants for a potential purchaser. "They came up and said, 'Whoa, it needs way too much work.' And we bought it a month later," she says. The Seawards had been involved in camping since 1957, when Sarah's parents, Robert and Jean Seaward, teachers in Concord, Massachusetts, opened Camp Nashoba Day in nearby Littleton. They named the day camp for the Algonquian people who once lived on the site. Their children, Sarah, Janet, and Marcia, grew up at the camp, first as campers and later as instructors and directors. Today, Janet and Sarah co-own Nashoba North, but Janet spends most of her time in Massachusetts as codirector of the day camp with Marcia and Jean.



**Opposite:** Camp Nashoba North is located on Crescent Lake in the Sebago Lake region. Swimming is the only activity in which all campers are required to participate. **This page:** Campers wait their turns at the 35-foot high, six-sided climbing wall.





An accomplished equestrienne, Sarah Seaward brings an expert's perspective to Nashoba North's riding program, which is open to both experienced and newbie riders. The two stables can hold 28 horses and ponies. "These are competition horses; they are not going to go out on the trail," she says. Beyond riding lessons, campers learn about horsemanship and how to care for the animals, since many of them either lease or own horses at home. "We want every rider to know from a safety standpoint how to tack up your horse, how you lead your horse, and they need to know when a horse needs attention." The Toppers program is an intensive, week-long session at the end of the summer, during which experienced riders "eat, drink, and sleep horses," attending lectures on horse-focused subjects such as first-aid and feeding, says Seaward. Even during this

specialty program, however, campers have time to waterski or make pottery. These, like every activity at Nashoba North, are taught by dedicated instructors. "We don't have general counselors; everyone wears one hat," says Seaward. "So if you are teaching sailing, that's your forte, and you have a tremendous amount of buy-in to that activity because it's yours."

When campers first arrive at Nashoba North, they spend a day and a half exploring every available activity before making any decisions about their schedule. "So you're gonna learn, 'Yeah, fishing, I'm gonna have to touch a worm,' or they go to the climbing wall and think, 'That's 35 feet; I don't know if I've ever done that before,'" Seaward says. Every Sunday, campers go to the library to choose their five activities for the upcoming week. They must choose at least

three "majors," which meet daily; "minors" meet every other day. All activities are coed. "We knew from our own experiences growing up that kids really want choice, but that you have to have a really strong orientation so the kids know how to make a decision," says Seaward. "On Sundays when they're in the library making their choices, there are staff everywhere to guide them."

Woodshop counselor Chris Ramsey first came to Nashoba North as a camper in 2005. His camp experience began elsewhere, at a sport-heavy camp where he had an "awful summer" of playing soccer all day, "and if I wanted to do something else it was kind of like, tough cookies," says Ramsey, who is in his last year of a five-year college engineering program. "This is the first place I ever played a



**This page, from left:** The Creative Arts program includes pottery, woodworking, photography, arts and crafts, and the culinary arts. The archery range is popular with both girls and boys. **Opposite:** Eating on the deck outside the dining hall is a reward for campers whose cabin is the cleanest at weekly inspection.





**Opposite:** Sailing a JY is just one of many ways campers get out on the water.

**This page:** Director Sarah Seaward on the steps of her cabin.

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**“IT’S GREAT TO BE UNPLUGGED. YOU’RE NOT JUST SITTING NEXT TO EACH OTHER TEXTING.”**

saxophone solo, the first place I ever sang in front of people, the first place I ever built anything.” That summer of 2005, his cabin counselor taught woodworking and encouraged him to sign up. “And now I’m finishing an engineering degree because I liked it so much—it’s had a total impact on my entire life,” he says. Ramsey’s years at Nashoba North included Summits, a two-week, community-service-oriented program for teens “who have been campers and really want to be back at camp but are too old to be regular campers,” he says with a smile. Summits participants volunteer at Good Shepherd Food Bank, Habitat for Humanity, and Camp Sunshine, among other Maine organizations, efforts that often count toward their high school community-service requirements.

Ramsey and I are chatting on a covered deck outside Nashoba North’s dining room in Plummer Hall, which is perched on a hill overlooking the camp’s two-hole golf course and the tree-lined lake beyond. Campers are starting to file in for lunch; on the menu today are steak sandwiches and cheese pizza, plus the always-available and well-stocked salad bar. Seaward introduces me to chef Russell Damon, who has worked

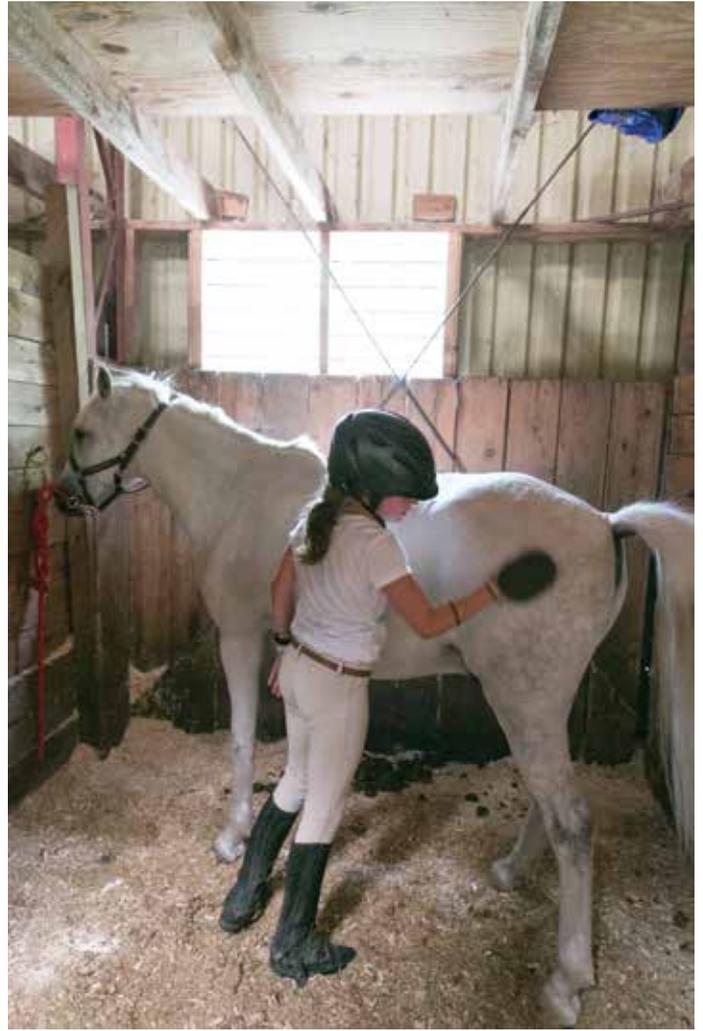
at Nashoba North for 20 summers. Meals are an important aspect of life at camp, and the jovial chef’s long experience has taught him, he says, that food is “the gateway to happiness.” Eighty to ninety percent of his ingredients are fresh—many are locally sourced, with some produce coming from organic producer Mulberry Farms, just down the road. Every Tuesday night the food and dining hall decor spotlight a different culture; tonight it’s Mexican night with beef and chicken fajitas. Before we can sit down for lunch, however, singing is required. The room breaks into a rousing “You Are My Sunshine,” and I join in, smiling at the familiar words and wishing

again that I could go back in time and experience this sweet place as a camper.

The arts at Nashoba North go well beyond tie-dying T-shirts and weaving friendship bracelets, although those time-honored crafts are still popular here. On Saturdays campers dress up for dinner before the weekly Arts Night, which includes theater, music, and dance performances. “It’s ambitious; we do a one-act play every week and a musical every four weeks,” says Seaward. Campers can learn how to play the guitar, piano, and percussion instruments, and the camp’s Rock Shack even houses a recording studio. “We find







**Opposite:** Seneca girls enjoying some cabin time after lunch. **This page, from left:** Ernesto, a seven-year camper, works in the woodshop. Camp pony Jimmy gets a grooming in his box stall.



that kids are really starving for music," she says.

After lunch, Seaward has arranged for me to meet with some of the older campers. My first stop is Seneca, a cabin of 14-year-old girls, most of whom are in at least their fourth summer at Nashoba North. Sitting on tidy bunks decorated with photos, artwork, and mementos, the girls are effusive in their praise of their camp experiences. They show me a book one of them made, titled *CAMP (aka: The Best Place on Earth)*, with a cover photo of the lake at sunset and a bonfire burning on the beach in the foreground. Inside are group photos with captions such as, "I don't get homesick, I get campsick," and "You can take the girl out of the camp, but you can't

take camp out of the girl." The girls echo what I've heard from other Maine summer campers: spending time in such close proximity creates especially strong, often lifelong, friendships. "I tell my friends at home I've known Phoebe for six years and I've only been with her for about eight months," says Bostonian Haley. The bonds are strengthened because cell phones aren't allowed, a prohibition that the girls embrace. "It's great to be unplugged," says Phoebe, who lives in Washington, D.C. "You're not just sitting next to each other texting." On the other side of the camp, I chat with several boys around a picnic table. They include three international campers, which Seaward says make up 15 to 17 percent of the camp's population. Carlos particularly enjoys all the water

sports, which are unavailable to him in Venezuela. Albert, a lanky teen from Spain, takes advantage of Nashoba North's robust and popular soccer program; at home, though, he runs triathlons.

Seaward and her golf cart drop me off at my car, but I have another stop to make before leaving camp. On the way out, I pull up next to one of the barns and then wander inside, breathing in the familiar and beloved scent of horses and hay from my girlhood. I nuzzle a few soft equine noses as I walk from stall to stall, talking softly to the horses and thinking how lucky Nashoba North campers are to spend summers among them. Even for a visitor, camp can ignite the flame of memory. Oh, if only time travel were possible. ✚