

Back stroke



FAR FROM HOME, CLOSE AT HEART

by AmyJo Brown
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Kids at Camp Haiastan enjoyed the old pool and are looking forward to jumping into their newly constructed pool, a large project that impressed even its builders.

Fourteen-year-old Michael Kulegian is looking forward to camp this year, and it's not just because he's going to see his best friend, or because of the songs he'll learn or the sports he'll play.

He's ready to jump into the brand-new pool.

"I'm going to try it out as soon as I get there," Michael says. "It's big — Olympic size!"

Kids come from all over the United States, Europe, South America and even the Middle East to attend Camp Haiastan in Franklin, Mass., just like their parents before them and, for some, even their grandparents.

"My sisters used to camp there. My husband was a camper. A lot of our friends were campers," says Michael's mother, Grace. "There's a long tradition of campers."

Camp Haiastan is an Armenian youth camp, the first one ever established in the U.S., and the closeness of the campers stems from the tortured history of the Asian nation, dating to the atrocities during World War I. "Our parents are survivors of the first genocide," camp director Bob Avakian says. "We migrated here [to the U.S.] to keep our culture and tradition. That idea led to doing something for the kids in the summertime."

Next to the usual camp activities, Camp Haiastan offers Armenian cooking and dancing classes, as well as language and history lessons.

Not even last September's terrorist attacks have kept the kids away this summer. "We were very concerned ... but we got a call from parents in England shortly after, and they said, 'Don't worry, we're coming,'" Avakian says.

When the number of kids attending began peaking at more than 300 each summer, Avakian and the camp's board decided they had outgrown the 70-by-30-foot pool built in the 1960s, a decade after the camp opened.

Although the small pool had survived the harsh New England winters thanks to repairs, the board decided a more suitable pool was needed to accommodate the increasing enrollment and water activities. A fund-raising effort began 1-1/2 years ago — and the director was taken aback at the amount of money collected.

"The fund-raiser definitely exceeded our expectations," Avakian says.

As enthusiasm for the project garnered more and more donations, "the size of the pool grew and grew," says Keith Temple, general manager of B&L Pools in Uxbridge, Mass. Primarily a residential pool-building company, B&L embarked on the largest project it had ever attempted: Truly L-shaped, the shallow end measures 85 by 35 feet and the diving end is 25 by 35 feet.

Paul Laverdiere, owner of the building firm, says he and his crew didn't take the time to let it intimidate them. "We never sat back and said, 'Look at the size of that hole,'" he says. "But we were overwhelmed when we finished."

So were the Kulegians. Grace drove her kids to see the pool before and after it was filled with water. "They were pretty impressed," she says. "Pretty impressed."

