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## THE KIDS OF CAMP I AM

Campers from a pioneering retreat for gender-nonconforming children look back on what it taught them — and their journeys to becoming who they are. Photographs by Lindsay Morris / Interviews by Ruth Padawer

# The Kids of Camp I Am

Campers from a pioneering retreat for gender-nonconforming children look back on what it taught them – and their journeys to becoming who they are.  
*Photographs by Lindsay Morris*  
*Interviews by Ruth Padawer*



# Fourteen years ago,

a Massachusetts mother of a gender-nonconforming son organized a tiny “summer camp” of sorts, where for several days her child and others like him could openly wear frilly pastel nightgowns and tend to their My Little Ponies. Three other families showed up that year. As the campers played together, their brothers and sisters discovered that they weren’t the only kids whose siblings wanted to be princesses — and their parents found support as they grappled with next steps. At the time, it was perhaps the only camp in the nation for kids who are now sometimes called “gender fluid” or “gender expansive,” children who, regardless of their gender identity, don’t want to be confined in their clothing and play by society’s prescribed boundaries.

More families — from Arizona, Illinois, Indiana, Maine, Mississippi, New York, South Carolina, Texas, Utah — started going to the camp, most of whom discovered it through a private listserv connected to one of the few programs at that time for gender-fluid youths, run out of Children’s National Medical Center in Washington. Almost all the campers were assigned male



Lindsay Morris’s son Milo in 2003 at age 3. Opening pages: Ryan in 2021.

at birth. Some were OK with being boys, as long as they could do things that girls were allowed to do. Others knew, or would soon know, that they were girls.

Over the years, the various organizers, all volunteers, insisted on keeping the camp’s existence quiet: They avoided advertising, and each new family was vetted through an hour-long interview to make sure they weren’t anti-queer trolls. Most summers, camp was held at a Wisconsin retreat center — offering four or five days of intense camaraderie that the children, parents and siblings shared with almost no one else. While the children ran around in shimmering mermaid tops, flouncy skirts and glittery pink barrettes, their parents gathered to share their hopes and challenges and get advice from experts. It was called Camp I Am.

Lindsay Morris, a professional photographer, was one of the parents who took her son there. She photographed the kids swimming in the lake, roasting marshmallows and getting ready for the camp’s fashion and talent shows — images she eventually turned into a book, “You Are You,” which was published in 2015. Some of those photographs also illustrated an article I wrote for this magazine in 2012 about parents’ responses to little boys who were deeply drawn to “girl” things.

Now that many of the campers are adults, Lindsay was curious about how camp affected them and whether it helped them forge their identities. She reached out to some of the early Camp I Am families and asked the campers if they would be willing to be photographed again for The New York Times Magazine. Of the eight whose photos are in these pages, half are trans women, with a range of sexual orientations. The other half are cis men who are gay — “cis” meaning having the same gender identity they were assigned at birth. These eight campers are not representative of how gender-nonconforming children on the whole will identify as adults. No reliable data exists on that question, but experts say that when provided a supportive environment, gender-nonconforming children will live in a way that suits them, and some will even end up as straight and cis. (Given the harassment that L.G.B.T.Q.+ people often face, we are using only the campers’ first names to preserve a measure of their privacy.)

These days, it’s much easier to find a summer camp that caters to L.G.B.T.Q.+ youths than it was when Camp I Am was founded. The camp ended in 2018, but its legacy lives on in the people who attended. Elias, one of the former campers I interviewed, summed up its impact, a conclusion the others echoed: “Camp gave me memories of expressing myself freely and what it felt like to accept myself. And years later, that helped me realize that the things we did at camp weren’t actually something we had to leave in our childhood.” ♦

Photographs by Lindsay Morris

# Hannah

‘My story is so atypical for trans people. I’ve had such a small amount of real hardship. The incredible support I got gave me the confidence to explain myself to the world.’



Hannah grew up in a very progressive family in a very progressive Connecticut community and attended a cozy, private elementary school — all places where gender-nonconforming children like her could mostly disregard society’s strictures for boys and girls. Her family first went to Camp I Am when Hannah was 7 and returned for four more years. She also went to a progressive Reform Jewish sleep-away camp, where for three years she used male pronouns and lived (uncomfortably) in the boys’ cabin — while also having long hair and wearing “girl” clothes. In fifth grade, she told her classmates she was a girl. That summer, she attended the same Jewish camp, this time as a girl, and was fully welcomed there. “My childhood was almost blissful ignorance of society’s harsh gender roles,” she said.

In seventh grade, Hannah started at another private school. At first, she kept her gender history secret, not because she was ashamed of being transgender but because she didn’t want it to define her. “Middle schoolers are judge-y,” she said, “and like every middle schooler, I wanted to blend in.” But some of her classmates knew her from elementary school, so word spread. Still, it was pretty much a nonissue: “At that point, I was already so well-equipped from Camp I Am, the Jewish camp, elementary school and my whole extended family. For many trans people, if they were put in the same amazing environment I had — fully accepted as trans — there would be so much more joy.”

*Hannah, 18, is starting college in the fall. She plans to major in computer science and English.*

Hannah in 2020 and 2011.



# Elias

'We'd all show what we brought to wear and worked out how we should do our hair and how to put on makeup. It was a few concentrated days doing things that I wished I could do all year.'

Elias went to Camp I Am for four years, starting at age 5. "Back then," he said, "I was two different Eliases: School/Outdoors Elias and Dress-Up Elias. I'd had enough negative reaction to the things I was interested in — dresses, dolls, girl toys — to infer that if I went to school in girly clothes, things would not go well. But at camp, I could be Dress-Up Elias the whole time."

When Elias began fourth grade, which was the first year of middle school in his Maine hometown, he decided to put Dress-Up Elias in the closet. He cut his long hair short and quit wearing "girl" clothes, even at home. "I figured if I was in

middle school, I wasn't a kid anymore," he said. "And dressing up is just for kids. I internalized the stigma about femininity."

But he still yearned to express himself. In high school, he told his classmates he was gay and began doing drag performances at a queer coffee shop and a theater in a nearby city. Having learned to use a sewing machine when he was 8, he made his own costumes. When he performed, he called his character Veronica Tease, who expressed what he called his "feminine side." The pandemic forced him to stop performing but offered him some perspective: "I realized I was

compartmentalizing the 'masculine' and 'feminine' side of myself, partly because I had internalized homophobia. I decided to combine Veronica and Elias into one person."

A year ago, he moved to New York City, where he became an assistant to a costume designer. He often wears carefully crafted, dramatic outfits, sometimes with stilettos or six-inch platform shoes. "I'm now trying to push myself to wear whatever I want and to make clothes for myself that don't have those boundaries."

*Elias, 19, is starting college in the fall. He plans to major in fashion design.*



# Nicole

'I always felt like a girl. The world just didn't see me that way. Camp helped me find the right ways to talk about it and the right resources, building a support system for myself.'



Nicole was 11 when she first went to Camp I Am. Her favorite part was when she got to sing "Reflection," from the movie "Mulan": "Who is that girl I see staring straight back at me? When will my reflection show who I am inside?" She had been involved in theater and singing since she was 5, but she remembers that at camp, "for the first time, when I sang, I felt fully and authentically myself. In theater, you're always pretending to be someone else. But at camp, it was just me being me."

As puberty loomed, she became terrified that she would soon look and sound like a man, even though she knew she was a girl and should grow into a woman. In seventh grade, she transitioned and took the name Nicole. Before she told her classmates, she asked the principal to require training for the staff and the student body to make the school more welcoming of trans kids.

Her L.G.B.T.Q.+ advocacy led to an invitation to sing at an event in support of a bill to ban discrimination based on gender identity in Massachusetts. Nicole agreed and soon began giving speeches at political events. The bill passed in 2016. When opponents called for a repeal, she worked with lawmakers to stop that effort. She also became a youth ambassador for the Human Rights Campaign, the largest L.G.B.T.Q.+ advocacy group in the country.

"Advocacy has been a huge component of my life these last six years," she said. "I'm fortunate to feel safe enough to be honest about who I am. And I feel it is my responsibility to use my voice — written, spoken or sung — to help others who feel they don't have a voice."

*Nicole, 19, is pursuing a bachelor-of-fine-arts degree at a music conservatory.*



# Danny

'Growing up, my brother and I bickered over everything, but he has always had my back, even before I realized it. He did stuff to make me feel normal.'



Unlike his older brothers, Danny played with girls and Barbies and loved sparkly clothes. But in first grade, he stopped wearing glittery things to school, aware that he would be teased. Still, when Halloween rolled around, Danny told his mom he wanted to be a princess in a blue dress, figuring it was the one day he could publicly dress that way. His brother Stephen, who was in third grade, announced that he, too, wanted to be a princess in a pink dress, reckoning that kids would find it funny that a popular, athletic boy like him was wearing a dress — and would assume that Danny was just part of Stephen's joke. The brothers happily took their costumes to school, but by the end of the day, his mom recalled, Stephen was crying. Fifth graders made fun of him.

Two years later, in 2007, she started Camp I Am to support families like hers. By seventh grade, Danny was

still drawn to "girly" clothes, but he avoided wearing them in his Massachusetts town. He had come out as gay and feared harassment. Even at camp, he couldn't shake his worries. At the fashion show, Stephen would walk the runway, wearing a dress and a wig to convince Danny that it was fun. Danny was hesitant. One year, Danny hung a gown only over his right shoulder and put make up only on that side of his face. Another year, he wore stylish "boy" clothes and a fedora.

"I didn't want to be viewed as 'too gay,'" he said. "I was caught up in the crappy things teenage boys said in my school and in video games. The worst put-down was 'You're so gay.' So I felt I had to butch it up so I wouldn't get bullied. I was afraid to let my guard down, even at camp."

*Danny, 22, is a waiter and a host at a New England restaurant.*



# Stefi

'I identify as male and use male pronouns and typically wear male clothes, but in my mind, I don't feel completely male, and I don't feel completely female. I'm a mix and flow of all of that.'

Stefi first attended Camp I Am when he was 8. Some of the other campers were already saying they were girls, which made Stefi wonder if he was, too. He eventually concluded that he was not a girl — and he wasn't nonbinary either. "To this day," he said, "I know very few people who express their gender the same way I do."

In seventh grade, Stefi, who lives in Arizona, came out as gay. By then, he was attending a welcoming Montessori school. He began to allow himself to wear jewelry, scarves and colorful clothes. "I was pretty much the only kid there who was gender-creative," he said, "but everyone at that school was

so accepting that I didn't really feel alone."

Now that high school has ended, he occasionally wears a dress when he goes out with friends. In his relatively liberal hometown, he's rarely hassled by passers-by. "It helps that I'm 6'2" and have a big, male physique," he said. Nevertheless, he still fears judgments, not from strangers but from his friends and family — "which is ironic, because those are the people who have supported me no matter what. I know they don't care what I wear. It's just my own anxiety."

For his photo shoot, Stefi decided to wear a dress. "I wanted to pay homage

to myself from 10 years ago, a little kid who was so confused. Now that I feel set on who I am, I wanted to give a message to my younger self — 'Soon you're going to feel comfortable in your identity; you're going to feel good and not scared' — and maybe a message to my current self, too."

*Stefi, 18, will start college in the fall. He intends to study music and wants to write scores for film and TV.*



# Ryan

‘Because of how other kids reacted to my gender, I was conditioned to anticipate animosity, and that all fell away when I was at camp.’



Ryan was 4 when she told her parents that she was a boy on the outside but a girl inside. She was 5 when she and her family first attended Camp I Am. That fall, she insisted that her parents refer to her as a girl. They informed the teachers and staff at her school in Illinois and organized trainings to help them serve transgender students. Ryan’s mother also called other parents to explain that Ryan was transgender, what that meant and how they might explain it to their children. Almost all the parents were supportive.

Nevertheless, the boys who used to be Ryan’s friends quit playing with her. And when she was in second grade, fifth-grade girls harangued her, following her on the playground and insisting that she explain why she was now a girl. Pressed by Ryan’s parents, the principal intervened and the hounding stopped. Middle school was

harder. Once, when Ryan was changing in the girls’ locker room after gym, a girl yelled: “You’re a tranny. What’s wrong with you? You’re disgusting!”

“Even people who I thought were my friends just watched and were silent,” Ryan said. “And some of the other girls were staring at me with such loathing.” Eventually, a teacher helped Ryan start a gay-straight-alliance club to encourage inclusivity. Many kids joined, and two other students came out as trans and several more came out as gay.

For 11 summers, Ryan attended Camp I Am, and her mother was the camp organizer for nine of those years. “At camp, I never had to worry about animosity,” she said. “I felt I could be me. Honestly, it was magic.”

*Ryan, 18, is starting college in the fall. She plans to major in international relations and political science.*



Ryan in 2021 and 2011.

Photographs by Lindsay Morris

# Tavish

‘Originally, I was a very feminine boy, and now, compared to girly girls, I’d be viewed as a masculine girl. At camp, I could be myself instead of trying to fit into the mold.’



For most of her life, Tavish adamantly identified as a boy — a boy who loved “girl” things. When Tavish was in elementary school, she grew her hair long and wore sparkly butterfly ribbons, shimmering jewelry and lots of fuchsia shirts, pants and dresses. At Camp I Am, that was fine. But at school, some boys badgered Tavish, asking: “Are you a boy or a girl? I forgot.” In third grade, Tavish exasperatedly said, “Why can’t I be a boy who just likes to wear girl things?” To make her point, she noted that a boy in her class wore a soccer jersey every day but that didn’t make him a professional soccer player. That year, Tavish decided to wear “girl” shirts three times a week and “boy” shirts twice a week.

In middle school, which started in fifth grade in her New Jersey hometown, Tavish joined the gay-straight-alliance club and started to

question her gender identity. When Tavish was 12, her parents enrolled her in a camp where no one knew her. Tavish decided to tell the campers and counselors that she was a girl, to see what that would feel like. When camp ended six weeks later, Tavish asked her family to use female pronouns for her. As months went on, Tavish realized that she felt more like a girl than a boy and told her schoolmates that she was a girl.

“The kids were so used to misgendering me as a girl,” Tavish said, “so once I became a girl, it was much easier for them to remember I was a girl. But the fact that they were finally gendering me correctly wasn’t a sign of respect. They just kept saying what they’d always said, but the gender words they used now just happened to fit.”

*Tavish, 18, is taking a gap year before attending college. She plans to major in art.*



Tavish in 2020 and 2010.

# Zach

'I remember when I arrived that first year, I saw all the other boys had American Girl dolls, and I was like, "You're like me!" I realized I wasn't as weird as Utah told me I was.'

Zach grew up in a Mormon family in Utah. Nearly everyone he knew shared that faith, which considers "homosexual behavior" a transgression. In first grade, Zach wore a Hello Kitty sweatshirt to school and absorbed the stares and whispers of his schoolmates. "That's when I realized I was different from everyone else," he said.

Zach hid his gender fluidity until ninth grade, when he befriended some non-Mormon theater kids who accepted him fully. He came out as gay. Over the years, he began wearing whatever clothing, makeup or jewelry he wanted. He stopped going to church, but he remains very

close to his family. Zach's parents, who have always supported him, oppose Mormon ideas about homosexuality and gender roles, and they volunteer at Pride parades. But they remain connected to their local church, where congregants and even the bishop are mostly nonjudgmental.

One of Zach's brothers is especially orthodox but also very loving toward Zach. When they're together, they avoid discussions about politics or religion. Several months ago, at a ceremony to bless his brother's baby, Zach kept his hands balled up the whole time to hide his long acrylic nails, to make the other guests

comfortable and to spare himself their judgments. "As much as my brother and I have a strained relationship," he said, "we hold our tongues. My mother loves both of us so much, and I would never want to do anything to hurt her in any way, and I'm sure my brother feels the same way." At times like those, it helps to remember Camp I Am: "The biggest thing I learned from camp was that I'm not alone. I'm not the only boy who likes girl stuff."

*Zach, 22, is an au pair in Honolulu. He was a political-science and peace-studies major in college.*

