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Camp preps folks for life lessons

Hollywood biggies reflect on summers past

By ROBERT SCHWARTZ

A lot of Hollywood notables began their training way before they got to the mailroom or somebody's desk. They started at summer camp.

"Camp is a constant initiation, just like Hollywood," said "Freaks & Geeks" creator Paul Feig. "Both have a kind of 'Lord of the Flies' going on with them."

Cumbustible forces of ego, power and influence are common to both worlds. "In camp or Hollywood you've gotta have a goal," Feig added. "In both places and on your way to that goal, there's wreckage in your wake."

The book "Camp Camp," co-authored by Roger Bennett and Jules Shell ("Bar Mitzvah Disco") and published recently by Crown, is chockablock with reminiscences and embarrassing photos of tube-socked and braces-baring campers. The roster includes Paramount exec Amy Israel, TV producer David Kohan, author Sloan Crosley and music producer/DJ Mark Ronson.

Ivan Reitman, the auteur behind perhaps the pre-eminent camp pic "Meatballs," wrote the book's forward. (Not featured is Michael Eisner, who published a more straightlaced memoir in 2005 called, simply, "Camp.")

East Coast spots known as Scatico, Kennybrook, Takajo and the like are where long hot days are filled with care packages from home, horseback riding, and the ever-present risk of being hung from a flagpole in your underwear. What better preparation could there be?

"The best training for show business is trying to herd 40 8-year-olds out of bed and getting their teeth brushed at a summer camp," said MTV Networks Entertainment Group prexy Doug Herzog, who spent eight summers as a camper and counselor at Camp Scatico in Elizaville, N.Y. "At camp, we learned how to play fair and that winning isn't everything."

Not everyone has such a bullish take. "Camp is danger," cracked Feig. "I had the opportunity to go away when I was growing up in Michigan. But really, the people in charge there can't protect you very long so I elected not to bother."

Feig doesn't regret the decision to become a Boy Scout instead.

"I knew it would be a constant initiation ... an under-supervised free-for-all," he said. "Something I get every day in Hollywood."

Another lesson: What goes around comes around. That kid you left cold and naked out in the woods alone could wind up one day being the adult that could greenlight your project. Many years and cups of bug juice later, that same bunkmate might be sitting across from you at a pitch meeting.

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Once, in a meeting, Herzog casually mentioned his beloved Scatico only to be told that Brillstein Grey exec Jonathan Liebman had not only attended Scatico but shared a cabin with the future network prexy. "He'd slept in the very next bunk one summer and I didn't even know it," Herzog marveled.

Sometimes relationships formed in camp can sustain into adulthood. Writer Adam F. Goldberg ("Fanboys") was taken under the wing of future Walden Media exec Evan Turner when they were both teenage campers.

"Evan really took pity on me because I was maybe the geekiest kid around," Goldberg said, "and he taught me how to pick up girls and how to shoot a jump shot."

Even today the relationship between the two remains strong for that particular reason. "I was recently pitching a movie to him and as is always the case, halfway through the pitch we started laughing about something that happened at camp," Goldberg said.

Reunions can't always recapture the fond memories of camp, however.

"Late last summer a bunch of us went back to camp to one of the cabins we had slept in all those years ago," Herzog said proudly, "but we ended up being just a bunch of 50-year-old men sleeping on bunks snoring."

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