

Colorado Secular Organizations

A Study of Selected Successful Local Groups and How They Do It

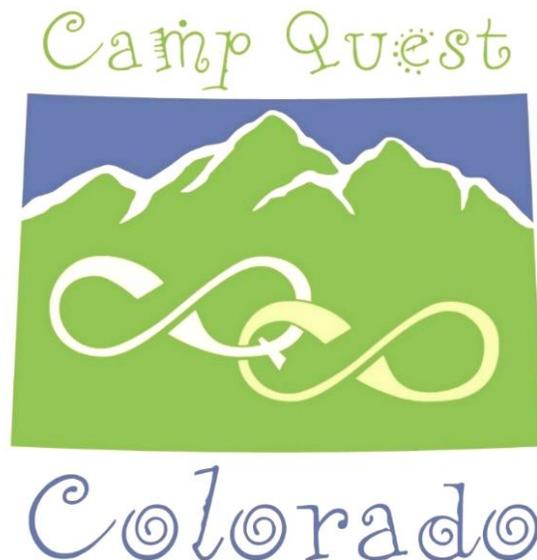
by

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This is a continuation of the series *The Roots of Building a Secular Community*

Part 8 – The Founding of Camp Quest Colorado



There is one title I own that no one can ever take from me. I am the official Founder of Camp Quest Colorado. It all started in the Summer of 2012. I had been put in charge of running the Atheist Alliance of America national convention in Denver. Mary and her husband, Joe, who ran Camp Quest Oklahoma at the time, came to the convention to set up a mini Camp Quest. This is a special program that Camp Quest offers to major secular conventions, so parents who want to see the speakers can bring their kids, and Camp Quest takes care of them at the convention. The kids get to do some of the same activities offered at the “real” Camp Quest.

I was so impressed with Camp Quest that I had to get involved. It is the very first nation-wide camp system that caters to kids from secular families, 8 to 17 years old. This includes atheists, humanists and freethinkers, but is open to anyone, including LGBT kids. The emphasis is on nature, science and reason, along with some traditional camp activities. Kids are encouraged to speak freely, especially about their views on religion, whether good or bad.

Camp Quest camps around the country usually go for one week at a time, and most camps do one session each summer. It is all done by dedicated volunteers and no one gets paid (except for a few persons at the national office in Columbus, Ohio). Camps are funded by camper registration fees and donations.



Horseback riding is always popular at Camp Quest Colorado

After the AAA convention, I was hired by the Richard Dawkins Foundation as an Accountant, which at the time was headquartered in Colorado Springs. The foundation totally supports Camp Quest, and even contributes money to it. I got to meet Amanda Metskas, the Executive Director of Camp Quest National, and was honored to have the opportunity to apply for starting Camp Quest Colorado.

So, after jumping through a lot of hoops and endless paperwork, Camp Quest Colorado was approved in April of 2013. It was too late to put together a full camp that year, so we decided to do a family weekend retreat that summer at my family ranch near Nederland, Colorado. This included the parents, so we only needed a few counselors. Everyone camped out and we did some fun activities and nature studies. It was a big success with about 10 families or 30 people.



Pirate, Shark or Harpoon?

If Camp Quest wasn't so important, there is no way I would have even considered such a serious venture into an area that terrifies me. Just the thought of being responsible for a bunch of kids, and that one of them could get hurt totally freaked me out. However, what Camp Quest represented gave me the passion and determination to take it on. I have never worked so hard for no pay in my entire life. Camp Quest National did contribute some seed money, but I personally had to put in a lot of my own money to get Camp Quest Colorado going.

For 3 years in a row, I went to the Camp Quest National Summit held each spring in a different state. This is where classes are held to train leaders from each camp about Camp Quest philosophy and policies, and also to socialize and share stories about Camp Quest. I met some really wonderful people there.

As part of my training, I also attended two different camps as a counselor to learn the ropes. in 2013 I was sent to Camp Quest Oklahoma for a week, and in 2014 went to CQ Arizona. Both camps were an eye-opening experience.



Mary and Joe offered to help run Camp Quest Colorado for the first two years. I am forever grateful to them. Mary became the Camp Director and I was President and Chairman of the Board. Matt Meeks also joined the board and created the Camp Quest Colorado logo as well as the campquestco.org website. I paid to have Mary and Joe flown out from Oklahoma to help run the first family weekend retreat in 2013, and then again for the first real camp in the summer of 2014, which was held at YMCA of the Rockies outside of Estes Park.



I had been looking for a camp to rent, and was surprised to find that most camps in Colorado are Christian based with Bible studies, including YMCA. However, YMCA said they were open to any belief, including atheists and freethinkers. I made it very clear to them from the beginning that we were not religious.



YMCA of the Rockies is more like a resort than a camp, and accommodates many groups at the same time. It seemed reasonably priced and safe with most activities included. Unfortunately, the included activities did not include any of the major ones, such as horseback riding, zip line, swimming, rock wall climbing, a barbeque or even a camp fire. They kept adding on extra charges, so I got stuck with a huge bill at the end, which was thousands of dollar over the camp registration fees. I also had to help pay for experienced Camp Quest counselors coming from out of state.

In spite of this, Camp Quest Colorado's first real camp was a huge success with about 40 kids and counselors attending, including my two sons, Robby and Ben. Another highlight was on the last night, when we got to do an exclusive ice cream social and dance in the YMCA chapel, playing all sorts of loud heathen music, and daring God to strike us down. I knew we would not be going back to the YMCA camp, so the search for a new home began.





Joel Van Egbert heard about Camp Quest Colorado just in time to become a counselor at the YMCA camp. From day one, it was apparent that Joel was really special, and knew just about everything there is to know about running camps. We made him the Medical Director, which was very important, especially since we had several kids with severe medical issues.

As it turned out, Joel has run different camps for many years, but he was really excited about joining Camp Quest. Amanda, the national Camp Quest Executive Director likes to attend each camp's first year camp to make sure everything goes smoothly, so she was there. Joel impressed Amanda so much that he was hired by Camp Quest National as the first major consultant, and has traveled to many of the Camp Quests around the country to help them. He also teaches classes at the annual national summit. What a gem.



Joel Van Egbert



The lodge at Keystone Science School in Winter

Joel is also connected to the Keystone Science School in Keystone, Colorado, and worked there for years, which is also a camp and quite secular, so Joel became the new Camp Director of Camp Quest Colorado, and KSS is now the permanent home of CQCO. This is a perfect fit, and KSS even has an observatory with a 13 inch telescope. Nick Carpenter, as well as Clark, a staff member of KSS also joined the board of CQCO.



The observatory and yurt at Keystone Science School

August, 2015 was the first Camp Quest Colorado held at the Keystone Science School for a week. It was a big success and my two boys attended. Several of the featured activities included river rafting, a hike to the top of a 12,000 foot peak and of course, looking through the big telescope at night.



Hike to the top of a 12,000 foot peak



It's not camp without marshmallows

I had to step down as President and Chairman of the Board because of being over-extended with my business. In early August of 2016, the camp was again held at the Keystone Science School, and a big success.

So, Camp Quest Colorado continues on, and I can be proud of what I started and what I learned.



For more information about Camp Quest and Camp Quest Colorado, go to campquest.org or campquestco.org