

Television

MARCH 1-7

When Disney Gets Real . . . It Goes to Camp Waziyatah

BY LAUREL GRAEBER



Tomorrowland Was Never Like This



photos by Carolyn Kaster for Disney

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DISNEY and reality do not usually occupy the same thought, much less the same television hour. After all, a company that calls its creative principals "imagineers" and makes animated films about mermaids and mythological heroes seems an odd choice for a documentary series devoted to the nitty-gritty lives of ordinary mortals.

That image may change, however, with tonight's debut of the first and second episodes of "Bug Juice," the Disney Channel's first foray into what is popularly known as "reality television." Evolution Film and Tape, a production company, followed 27 boys and girls, ages 12 to 15, as they underwent that most American of summer rituals: sleepaway camp. The 18 half-hour episodes, which unfold with neither a narrator nor a script, are about much more than homesickness and poison ivy. They capture early adolescents struggling to negotiate difficult emotional terrain as well as the mountains and waterways of southwestern Maine during the summer of 1997.

"So much happens in one day of camp that one week there is like forever," said Donald Bull, a director of the series. As



"Bug Juice" campers, clockwise from left: Anna and Kisha hugging; Kisha, Stephanie and Lauren in canoes; Anna with her mother; Stephanie in a camp competition.

"BUG JUICE"

Sundays, 5 P.M., Disney

On the cover: The boys of Grove 4 at Camp Waziyatah, the setting for the new reality television series.

the kids said, 'We're with each other 24-7.' "

Mr. Bull's background includes three seasons as an editor of MTV's series "The Real World," which also involves filming the day-to-day interactions of young people in close quarters. But the PG-13 atmosphere of "The Real World," with its sexual crises and profanity-laced

dialogue, is a far cry from the bucolic universe of Camp Waziyatah in Waterford, Me.

"MTV's target audience and ours are different," said Rich Ross, senior vice president for programming and production at the Disney Channel. "Our core au-

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boss and said I really thought we could pull this off at Disney."

Finding an appropriate camp proved surprisingly easy. J. Rupert Thompson, a former lead cameraman for "The Real World" who worked with Douglas Ross as co-creator and co-executive producer of "Bug Juice," talked to his former high school teacher Peter Kerns, who was in the camping business. Mr. Kerns and his wife, Penny, had recently bought Waziyatah, whose diverse population appealed to the producers: the camp was coed and attracted both middle-class campers and children on scholarship. It also offered a wide array of activities, from water sports and horseback riding to creative writing and photography.

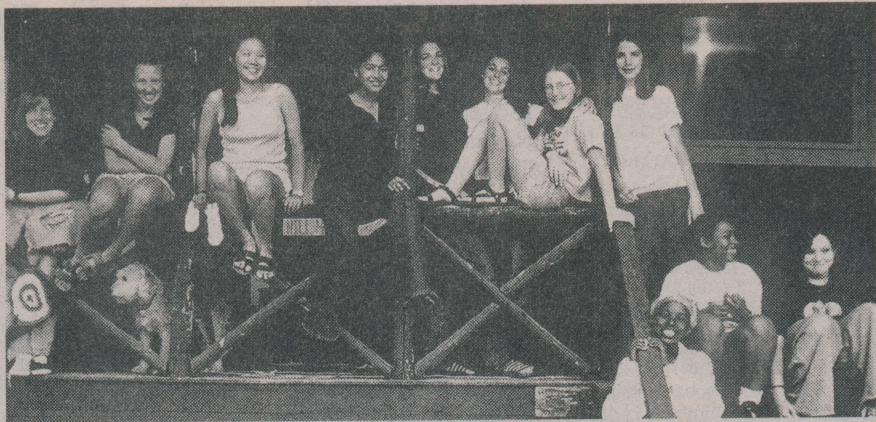
To select the individual campers the series would follow, the producers went through Waziyatah's pool of registrants

Anyone could ask
that the camera be
turned off.

and prospective campers, sending out questionnaires and release forms. Some 100 were interested in participating; after a round of telephone conversations, the producers chose 60 to interview at home. The members of the final group, who are identified by only their first names, range from Malik, a 13-year-old boy who lives in Brooklyn and attended the camp on a scholarship, to Lauren, a 14-year-old girl from Newton, Mass., who is used to having a maid at home.

"We wanted to get real kids, a wide variety of backgrounds and looks," said Douglas Ross. "We definitely didn't want aspiring actors and performers."

To capture what is typically a terribly self-conscious age group, the filmmakers had to gain the campers' trust and be as unobtrusive as possible. "My mantra



Carolyn Kaster for Disney

The campers of Hill 4, among the 27 followed by the "Bug Juice" cameras.

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