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'Bug Juice'

Summer camp
series dives
into the
roller-coaster
world of teen
emotions



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Disney drops in on camp for teens

By Harlene Ellin
Special to the Tribune

Yes, "Bug Juice" is a documentary, but it has nothing to do with insects or their bodily fluids.

Instead, this engaging new half-hour series showcases a different species — real teenagers — as they experience a summer at sleep-away camp in rural Maine. (Bug juice, you see, is a nickname for the ubiquitous red punch served at summer camps everywhere.)

Debuting at 4 p.m. Sunday on cable's Disney Channel, the 18-part show follows an eclectic group of 12- to 15-year-olds from their arrival at picturesque Camp Waziyatah to their emotional departure eight weeks later. In between, viewers get an intimate look at

these young men and women as they experience the joys and challenges that summer camp provides.

A former camper himself, Douglas Ross, the series' co-creator and co-executive producer, thought the magical world of summer camp would make the perfect setting for a reality-based program geared for 9- to 12-year-olds.

"Camp is an amazing opportunity for kids to flex their muscles and sides of their personalities they don't normally get to show," he says. "They feel safe at camp. They feel very free at camp."

Ross had no trouble pitching his idea to the Disney Channel. Rich Ross (no relation), the channel's head of programming and production, wanted the show without even seeing a pilot episode.

Rich Ross, also a former camper, predicts that "Bug Juice's" audience will get very involved in the weekly serial. "There will definitely be emotion for the viewers at home because they'll come

"There will definitely be emotion for the viewers at home because they'll come to know who [these kids] are," says Rich Ross, Disney Channel's head of programming and production.



On the cover:
Design by
Herman Vega.



Photos by Carolyn Kaster/Disney
"Bug Juice" uses a straightforward documentary style to tell its stories — unlike MTV's "The Real World."

to know who [these kids] are," he says.

Viewers will watch as friendships develop, romances bloom and fights break out against the picture-perfect backdrop of summer camp. A girl will grapple with homesickness. The basketball team will face their archrivals. Events such as the annual talent show, dances and nighttime rap sessions will stir up a wide range of emotions for the subjects.

If this sounds like "'The Real World' Goes Camping," think again. "Bug Juice" eschews the blaring rock music, quirky camera angles and gritty feel of MTV's long-running reality-based series. Instead the show uses a traditional documentary style to tell its stories.

Flashy productions "dress up a lack of content," Douglas Ross says. "And fortunately we don't have a lack of content in this show."

Putting the show together was a formidable feat. The producers had only a few months before the 1997 camp season opened to select a camp, find its subjects, get consent

'Bug Juice'
4 p.m. Sundays
Disney Channel

from hundreds of parents to film their children, prepare three crews to film the youngsters day and night for 56 days straight and set up the facility for shooting.

The first step—selecting a site—proved easier than expected. Douglas Ross' partner, Rupert Thompson, called a former prep school teacher who had been a long-time camp administrator. He found that the man had recently bought a rustic camp in Maine. A visit to scenic Camp Waziyatah sealed the deal.

The show's producers conducted extensive research to find the perfect subjects for the series. They held phone interviews with about 100 interested youngsters who were planning to attend Camp Waziyatah. From this group, about 60 kids received home visits from the filmmakers. The producers ultimately selected 27 campers as their

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main subjects, then assigned the kids to one boys' and one girls' cabin.

The four counselors featured were selected from a group already hired by the camp and from 350 others who responded to an open call over the Internet.

Stephanie, 15, a camper from Birmingham, Mich., says she quickly grew used to the cameras documenting almost every moment of her camp experience. By "the second day they blended in, and you didn't even notice that they were there. You noticed when they weren't there."

Being herself in front of the cameras was no problem either, the bubbly high school freshman says.

"I don't think I ever once acted or felt the need to act."

Still, having cameras around continuously created some unusual moments. For example, when Stephanie and a friend wanted to gossip, they went into a closet to hide from the cameras. Additionally, campers who weren't participating in the project sometimes would stop talking in mid-sentence



Carolyn Kaster/Disney

"Bug Juice" viewers will see friendships develop and fights break out.

when they remembered their friends were wired for sound.

Megan, 13, a camper from New York City, at first was somewhat skeptical about participating when she heard of the project, she says.

"I just wasn't sure how it would affect what the normal daily camp experience would be like."

However, she quickly adjusted to the omnipresent cameras, she says. She and others, in part, credit the show's crew with making them feel comfortable from start to finish.

To help them better understand the campers, the crew, from interns to executive producers, participated in the same training program as the camp's counselors. Most crew members were former campers themselves.

Because they were working with such young subjects, the crew made respect and sensitivity their top priorities. The children had the right to ask that the documentary makers turn off their cameras, and they had to give their permission to

be wired with microphones.

Director Laura Zucco, who followed the girl's cabin, was hard-pressed to think of an occasion when the children asked that the cameras be stopped.

Although the documentary makers kept their distance from the children, so as not to influence the action, a "fragile bond" developed between the campers and crew, Zucco says. "My role as they saw it was this real open, trusting person they could rely on," she says. "Camp ebbed and flowed, but there was always me."

For Zucco, the toughest moments during the shoot were not working with the children or capturing honest moments, but meeting the physical challenges.

"I had to learn to canoe and rock climb so I could document their lives," she says.

Those involved with "Bug Juice" say it has natural appeal. Adults likely will enjoy it for nostalgia's sake and kids will appreciate its honesty. "This is appealing, because it's so realistic," Megan says. "And there are not many shows like that, especially for kids."