



ISSUE 7

Beyond the Bunk

Camper Name: Sydney L.

Current Age: 20

Hometown: Surfside FL

Years as a Camper: 2016,
2017

Years as Staff: 2024

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Stories of campers who took their camp experience and built Jewish futures.

From Surfside to Seminary: How Camp Made Judaism Personal

Sydney grew up in Surfside, Miami, where being Jewish was always part of her life, but mostly in a traditional sense. She attended a Conservative Jewish elementary school, occasionally lit Shabbat candles at home, and went to shul on the High Holidays. “I always knew I was Jewish,” Sydney shared, “but I didn’t really understand what that meant beyond the basics.”



Sydney (bottom row, center) as a camper in 2017

It wasn’t until her mom heard about CGI Poconos and suggested she and her sister attend camp that something deeper began to take root. Her mother thought it would be a fun summer experience, but no one could have predicted the powerful transformation that would follow.

Sydney spent two summers at CGI Poconos, between fifth and sixth grade. From the moment she arrived, something clicked. “It felt like a whole world opened up for me,” she said. “For the first time, I felt connected to something greater.” Camp was her first exposure to a fully religious Jewish environment, and it was a revelation.

She learned about netilat yadayim, the beauty of tznius, and most memorably, the magic of Shabbos. Singing together around the Shabbos table and feeling spiritually united with other girls like her gave Sydney a deep sense of belonging. “CGI Poconos felt like a second home,” she recalled. “The staff, the atmosphere, the judgment-free environment—it all made such a lasting impact.”

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The second year, Sydney brought two of her friends—Natalie W. and Maya Z.—who also connected deeply to the camp experience. Although she couldn't return as a camper the following years, the inspiration she gained stayed with her. In high school, Sydney joined CTeen, started putting her phone away on Shabbos, and found herself yearning for that same connection she once felt at camp.

"I kept thinking back to those little moments at CGI Poconos that felt so meaningful," she said. That longing led her to enroll in a seminary in Israel after high school, where she developed a religious lifestyle and a strong love for Chabad.

This past summer, Sydney returned to CGI Poconos, this time as a sports specialist, eager to give back to the place that sparked her transformation. Now continuing her Jewish education at Stern College and preparing to spend the summer learning at Machon Alte, Sydney is still climbing, still growing.

"CGI Poconos gave me more than memories, it gave me direction," she said. And through every step of her journey, she carries those two summers in her heart, grateful for where they've led her and excited for what's still to come.

Sydney's story shows how just one summer at CGI Poconos can spark a lifelong commitment to Yiddishkeit and leave a lasting impact that continues to shape her life.

Sydney's Journey at a Glance:

- 2016** – *First summer at CGI Poconos*
- 2019** – *Attended International CTeen Shabbaton for her first time*
- 2022** – *Attended religious seminary in Israel*
- 2024** – *Returned as a staff member to CGI Poconos*
- 2025** – *Continuing to grow by attending the Machon Alte program this summer*



Sydney (left) as a staff member in 2024

CKids Gan Israel Poconos was founded in 2012 to provide Jewish girls—regardless of background or affiliation—with an immersive experience of Jewish joy, pride, and connection. Over the past 13 years, we've welcomed more than 800 campers from 26 states and 8 countries, igniting a lifelong passion for Yiddishkeit.



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