

56TH SIKH

International Youth Camp, USA

A Thundering Success!

By Sardarni Jasjit Kaur*

The International Institute Of Gurmat Studies, Inc. (IIGS), popularly also known as IGS held its 56th Sikh International Youth Camp in the scenic and serene mountains of the San Bernardino Valley, near Lake Gregory, a famous mountain resort in Southern California, from June 25th to July 1st, 00. The 7 day residential camp housed 180 participants (125 youth, 30 young parents, and 25 counselors). The number rose to 225 as about 45 additional family members came to join the camp on the weekend. That the camp was a thunderous success with the Sikh spirit soaring high amongst the participants was no surprise to me. I have seen this rejuvenation and resurgence camp after camp for the last 28 years. IGS was the first Sikh organization to pioneer a co-ed camping movement in 1972. Apart from the 56 youth camps, IGS has also held several family camps and mothers camps in various parts of the world. Be it the paradise Valley of Pahalgam in Kashmir, the pastoral mountains of Kulu and Manali, the exotically beckoning Khatmandu, the inviting beaches of Pataya, the impressive campus of Hatfield in England, the picturesque Toronto, or the fascinating Melbourne and Perth, down under, IGS has always picked the most desired resorts for its camp sites in the four continents that it has so far hosted the camps in.

The 56th Sikh International youth camp followed the same curriculum that IGS has fine tuned in the last almost three decades. The camp day starts early. While the sun is still nestling in the slumberous skies, and the eastern clouds are barley tinged with gold, the camp adjutants, a role superbly performed by Junior Counselors Sardarni Tej Preet Kaur of San Jose and Sardar Shantmoy Singh of San Diego, blew the wake up whistles. The Camp Sealy site for the 56th camp, not only had heated cabins but also hot showers! What a change from the bucket baths of the Salinas campsite where several California camps were held! After a quick "Ishannan", mandatory for all campers, there was a "Kanga - keshki" fall in. The counselors helped the little kids comb their hair and tie the yellow keshkies that have become the hall mark of IGS camps.

Their hair, neatly up, the campers now filed quietly into Baba Jis's room where Sardarni Gupreet Kaur one of the core members of IGS who has been serving the Guru's house for almost two decades through her enchanting Kirtan, had started the morning Jaap in her mellifluous voice. The melodious chant brought a stillness in the campers who sat cross legged with their eyes closed, their entire being enveloped by the "Ek Ong kar". Sardar Kavi Raj Singh led the breath meditation, a loud repetition of the shabad, waheguru, followed by a silent meditation where the shabad vibrated within each of us, was perhaps the most beautiful part of the day. Many campers experienced Simran, which is supposed to be the essence and the 'aadhaar ' of every Sikh's life, for the first time and were touched by its healing and transforming power. The Nishan Sahib Parade was led by Sardar Ramanjit Singh who also had the challenging responsibility of allocating cabins and scheduling duties. Sardar Kaviraj Singh and Sardar Gurdoyal Singh assisted in the parade readiness.

The campers were split according to their ability to read the Nitnem Banies and each camper was introduced to a Bani that they were unfamiliar with. The Camp Seely grounds resounded with the rhythm of Jaap Sahib mingled with the soothing songs of Sukhmani Sahib emanating from the older groups while the younger ones learned to recite the Jap Ji Sahib. The lectures that followed formed the core learning experience of the camp. Capt Kanwar Harbhajan Singh, the founder of the International Institute of Gurmat Studies and the moving spirit behind the camping movement, covered the times before Sri Guru Nanak Dev Ji, and through a dramatic and animated delivery, painted a picture of India shackled by a rigid caste system, plundered by the merciless invaders from Afghanistan and shaking at the knees with fear while her daughters were sold as slaves in the bazars of Ghazni. Into this world came Guru Nanak and shattered the fog of ignorance, breathing new life and hope in the terrorized and ignorant masses. The Guru's message tore through the veil of superstitions and broke the barriers between man and man. The campers watched in awe as the lives and teachings of the ten great Gurus unfolded before them in words that were on fire. Every subject was tackled, each question was duly deliberated, most doubts were allayed as Capt. Singh known as Bhapa Ji, mesmerized the campers with the heroic sagas of their Gurus and the unparalleled message of equality, liberty and respect for all. What is amazing how each camper is spell bound hour after hour in camp after camp and despite the physical discomfort of sitting on the floor for hours, they fall in love with their heritage!

While new campers were getting immersed in the Sikh teachings, the repeat participants studied the meanings of Rehras with me. We shared the beauty and depth of the Sikh thought in our evening prayer and many fully realized for the first time why the days stress and exhaustion drops off like waterlets from a tree when one delves into the Rehras every evening.

The two guest speakers at the camp were Giani SarabJit Singh and Major General Rajinder Singh. It was great for the campers to have a Giani to talk to them at their level and in the language they understood and attempt to answer their questions. General Rajindar Singh talked on the concept of Sant Sipahi and emphasized how important the Sipahi aspect was to our religion. A distinguished and decorated sipahi of the highest rank in the Indian army, his interpretation and presentation was compelling and convincing.

Afternoon langar was always a welcome interlude. The campers finally got a chance to stretch their legs! The food at the IGS camp is always top quality and belies the adage that one cannot please everyone. Japi Singh of LA said in his last day speech that the food was superb and at home he got dessert once in a while from his Mom, at the camp, he got it at every meal! Sardarni Manjit Kaur of Anaheim was the langar co-ordinator . A tireless worker, she supervised all preparations and offered a good mix of Italian, Mexican and Indian cuisine to the campers. Sardarni Yash Kaur, Sardarni Prem Kaur, Sardarni Payal Kaur and Sardarni Guninder Kaur were constantly helping with the Langar preparations along with several participating "MOM campers" who took turns to do Langar Sewa.

The post lunch session offered many extra curricular activities. Campers could sign up for learning Kirtan under Sardarni Gurpreet Kaur, Tabla under Sardar Ranjit Singh, Punjabi Classes designed and co-ordinated by Sardarni Amrit Kaur and Sardarni Jyoti Kaur. Sardarni Akasha Kaur, a dedicated American Singhni, held her 'Scriptures through Art' class for the under 12 years old. Sardar Arvind Singh of San Jose held a Sikh history class from the Pre- Guru period to the modern times. After word went round of how fascinating his class was, the numbers of the attendees in the class swelled! The "DOST" session followed these activities. DOST was a **discussion of all Sikh things** for teens. We touched upon subjects like dating, "arranged marriages", inter-racial marriages, the challenges that Kesadahri Sikh boys face in schools and how to combat them. No parents or outsiders were permitted to in this discussion . The teens shared their experiences openly and freely and every one learned from each other. We have been conducting these sessions for a few years now and each time it is amazing how the Sikh youth emerges stronger in their determination to find a mate that shares their

belief and value system. Sardar Jagjot Singh of Menlo Park a first time participant took an active role in these discussions especially with the boys who were inspired by his personal experiences.

In the free time the campers engaged in a variety of sports: basket ball, volley ball, table tennis, and swimming. Some preferred to hike in groups. After evening tea and sumptuous snacks, the campers gathered for the Rehras in groups. Kirtan followed. This time with every camper playing cymbals or bells and singing gustily. After dinner the "Khalsa Battery Charge" consisted of Jaikaras, Degh Tegh Fatehs, Panthic songs reverberating in the San Bernardino Hills and then everyone was off to bed. Exhausted. The camp doctor, Sardarni Charan Kamal Kaur and the camp nurse, Sardarni Bindu Kaur lovingly attended to the campers who felt unwell. Many times it was a touch of home sickness. Sardar Daljit Singh was kept on his toes carrying out camp administration duties. He was assisted by Sardar Karan Raj Singh, Sardar Kavan Singh, of St.. Louis and Sardarni Sartaj Kaur and Sardarni Kiran Kaur.

On the last day of the camp, forty campers participated in the speech contest. The judges, Sardarni Payal Kaur, Sardarni Ruby Kaur, and Sardar Arvind Singh had a tough time choosing the best speakers in the Junior and Senior categories. After much deliberation the trophies for the best speakers went to Sardarni Preeti Kaur of and Sardar Harpreet Singh who were also the best group leaders.

The grand finale of the last day was hosted by the Buena Park Sikh Temple, where several campers sang shabads, the best speakers gave their talks, and an impressive tabla demonstration was given by the newly trained tabla players. Bhapa Ji gave a talk on how caste system was dividing and splintering the Sikh community and said it was imperative to give up our parochial loyalties and embrace the Guru's vision of being Singhs and Kaur. Sardar Amarjit Singh, president of the Gurdwara gave away the camp awards.

The spectacular Nishan Sahib Parade as always impressed the Sangat and the campers gave a little demo of the "Khalsa battery charge". The Best campers were Sardarni Namrata Kaur of LA and Sardar Manmeet Singh of Japan.

Good Bye hugs were given, e-mails exchanged and promises made of coming to the future camps. Sardarni Charan kamal Kaur 's parting comment was especially meaningful. She said, that it was amazing how a small band of people maintain such vigor and verve that even in the 56th camp their enthusiasm and vitality remains as fresh as it must have been when the movement started 28 years ago. To quote, Bhapaji, it's the magic of the presence of the Guru's grace at each camp. The Chief Patron of the IGS movement is "Satguru Sacha Patshah Aap".

*(Sardarni Jasjit kaur is a Co-Founder of the IIGS and plans the camp education and curriculum)