

THE BEST OF COLORADO LIVING

DREAM BIG DAY CAMP

AS FEATURED IN

# COLORADO

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**COLORADO  
COUPLES**

**VAIL MANSION:  
\$21 MILLION**

**HISTORICAL  
HOUSES**

**OUR BEST  
CHOCOLATE**

**A HEALTHY  
HEART**

# Dream Big Day Camp

INSIGHTS INTO COLORADO'S BUSINESS COMMUNITY, FROM UPSTARTS TO INDUSTRY LEADERS

HILLTOP'S NEW  
DREAM BIG DAY CAMP

OFFERS A  
COMMUNITY-BASED  
EXPERIENCE THAT  
LETS KIDS BE  
THEMSELVES



PHOTO: BERNHARD SHAVITZ

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**WHO:** Husband and wife, George and Mary Stein

**WHAT THEY DO:** As co-owners of the new Dream Big Day Camp on the campus of Denver's Steck Elementary School, they're working to bring a traditional, kid-focused summer camp experience to the Front Range.

**AN OLD-FASHIONED CAMP** No doubt about it—George and Mary Stein are

camp people. Between the two of them, they have more than 50 summers of outdoor experience under their belt, and their excitement for the industry is as plain as the smiles on their faces. "We take a very professional approach to this," George says of their work, beaming, "and we're very passionate about it."

And why not? They've both been working at camps for years and George

all but grew up at the upstate New York facility that his grandparents founded in the late 1940s. The family business, Camp Echo Lake, was and is a traditional Northeastern summer camp, the kind of place where children come together to spend an entire season playing in the woods, living in cabins and learning to make assorted leather goods. For George and Mary, who spent nearly 15 years working together at Echo Lake, it was the ideal summer experience.

Soon after moving to Denver, however, the couple realized their idea of camp wasn't exactly the norm out here. Instead of bonfires, canoe trips and bug juice, they saw sports-themed camps and specialty programs—and

STORY: TIMOTHY SPRINKLE



parents struggling to find suitable summer activities for their kids.

“What we found were plenty of one-week programs where kids can learn to play tennis or learn to skate,” George says, “and those are great. But there wasn’t a camp out here that was a real community-based, build-up-an-attachment, staff-as-role-models kind of camp. What we were hearing from friends was, ‘we’re frustrated. Our kids are going from week, to week, to week and there’s no continuity.’”

Adds Mary, “We really felt like we weren’t seeing here what children should be offered.”

So they decided to go ahead and create it themselves, abandoning their new Colorado-based careers and setting to work on what would become

Dream Big Day Camp. By the time the first campers arrive this June, George and Mary will have spent the better part of a year working full time to create the entire camp—from the programming to the facilities to the staff—from the ground up.

**A COMMUNITY EXPERIENCE** For the

Steins, the move back to camp management just made sense. After all, it was camp that brought them together in the first place and camp that shaped their professional lives.

“We don’t profess to know it all,” George admits, “but we have a fair amount of experience. And out here our skill set is a little unusual, so we decided to go for it.”

And, by applying what they learned while running the Echo Lake overnight camp, they’ve set their sights on redefining what a day camp can be.

“We’re trying to create the kind of emotional safety that allows children to take risks,” explains Mary, “to get up on stage and sing a solo when they never would have done that before. That’s really what we’re about.”

**THE DETAILS**

DREAM BIG DAY CAMP IS LOCATED ON THE STECK-HILL CAMPUS IN HILLTOP AT 4TH AVENUE AND ALBION STREET.

- 303-377-1805
- WWW.DREAMBIGDAYCAMP.COM

ACTIVITIES INCLUDE:

- CELEBRATIONS OF BIRTHDAYS AND LOST TEETH
- BASEBALL, BASKETBALL, SOCCER
- GOLF, TENNIS, KARATE, ARCHERY
- YOGA, CLIMBING WALL, INLINE SKATING, BIKING
- GARDENING AND CERAMICS
- SINGING, HIP-HOP DANCING, CREATING SKITS
- BUILDING ROCKETS, WRITING POETRY

- 1** GEORGE AND MARY STEIN WITH THEIR CHILDREN
- 2** MARY HIKING WITH HER BOYS IN VAIL
- 3** MARY WRESTLING WITH A HORSE

That’s what sets Dream Big apart, too. Instead of herding campers from one activity to the next, the Steins are creating more of a community, a world within a world that allows kids to be themselves. And that, Mary says, is what makes the camp experience so special to so many people.

“So all of the sudden they’re taking a new risk, something they never thought they could do before, because they feel safe enough emotionally within camp to do it. No one’s going to tease them; they’re not going to be made fun of. It’s about creating an environment where children can thrive.”

**COMMON GROUNDS** Of course, the first step in creating that environment was transforming the Hilltop neigh-



PHOTO: ARTHUR ALEXANDER

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- 1 GEORGE STEIN SWIMMING WITH KIDS
- 2 GEARING UP FOR BASEBALL PRACTICE

borhood's Steck Elementary School into a true campground.

"Some of it just came down to gut feel, what felt right," George says of the decision to lease the school for the summer. "But we liked the neighborhood a lot, especially since it's not on a major artery but it's still accessible. The middle has a huge grassy area—probably 100 yards by 120 yards—it's got two tennis courts, several basketball courts, a brand new playground and it has a great auditorium."

But, for an experienced camp administrator like Stein, the right location has to have more than just great facilities. "You can stand in one spot and pretty much see everything going on," he says of the Steck location, shifting into responsible adult mode, "and I like that from a security and risk management standpoint."



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**TEAMWORK** Still, with all their camp experience, the Steins know that it's the staff that really make the difference. Counselors and program staff that are bored, lazy or just disinterested can create a bad atmosphere for the kids and very quickly take away from the overall experience. Preventing the problem can be tough, especially when you're dealing with seasonal workers, but for George it's serious business.

"When you have staff that go the extra mile—it sounds so simplistic, I know—but when you can really lead by example and do that, then they can turn around and pass it on to the kids, and everyone benefits. It's awesome."

As a result, he explains, his staff members tend to be a little older than those at most day camps. "What we found at Echo Lake was that the college kids were mature enough, but still cool enough and active enough to have fun with the kids. It's a good balance." **CE**

*Tim Sprinkle is a Denver-based freelance writer whose work has appeared in The Washington Post, The Christian Science Monitor, Outside, Wired and a variety of other national publications.*