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Denver couple dreams big about summer camp plans

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There are few places in Denver where one can while away the hours building rockets, making pottery, writing poetry and practicing jump shots — and where the only thing to be finished at the end of the day is a Popsicle.

George and Mary Stein are doing their part to change that, especially for hundreds of Denver's restless summertime youth.

June 11 will start the inaugural session of their Dream Big day camp, an idea made reality by the couple after decades of camp work in upstate New York. There, George Stein, 42, was the third-generation owner of Camp Echo Lake, a sprawling, 150-acre "self-contained little city" of a residence camp where the counselor/owner spent his summers.

"We come from a private approach, in that it's really analogous to a private school — but it's a private camp," he said.

After moving west two-and-a-half years ago, the Steins recently decided to apply the "private" approach to day camps — and it seems to be working. Since registration opened on Nov. 1, hundreds of campers from more than a dozen area schools have signed on.

"I don't think either Mary or I had expected this response so early," Stein said.

The keys to their success? Simplicity, communication and attention to detail, for starters.

At the camp's Web site (www.dreambigday-camp.com) — designed by Denver-based Internet Design and Development's Evan Dechtman — parents can quickly sign up their kids for sessions, and job-seekers can peruse available positions and download applications.

In the summer, the site will expand to showcase images of campers posted at the close of each day, and will add more applications. George Stein is pleased with the system's simplicity, both for parents and staff.

The Steins relied heavily on parental feedback in structuring Dream Big day camp. The idea started when a group of friends came to them and voiced a need for another day camp in the area.



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Mary and George Stein (with their 5-year-old son, Morry, between them) pose at Steck Elementary School with Annika Backs, 11, Marko Babiak, 6, and Larissa Babiak, 10.

Only a handful of general-purpose camps operate in the metro area, with seven accredited by the American Camp Association — a recognition the Steins soon hope to attain.

The couple learned what potential customers wanted via 15 get-togethers, eventually meeting with smaller groups in coffee shops to hash out the finer points.

"We wanted to get to learn the culture out here, and we wanted to learn what was important to parents," George Stein said.

They combined the local feedback with their experiences in New York, and Dream Big was born.

After looking at 30 to 35 properties, the Steins selected the joined Steck Elementary and Hill Middle School campus in Denver's Hilltop neighborhood as the first home of Dream Big. The site includes the playgrounds

of an elementary school with the ballfields and courts of a junior high school, along with what Mary Stein calls the perfect dropoff point for carpooling campers.

Also important to the Steins: Come summer, it's all theirs.

"George and I didn't want to share a facility with another program," Mary Stein said. "We really wanted to be the only ones there."

The Steins also plan to introduce a scholarship program that opens the camp experience up to children from families who may not be able to afford the \$350-per-week sessions. They hope to have the program in place within months, inspired to do so by George Stein's late father.

Morry Stein formed his "Echo Lake Idea" in 1970 as a means of getting disadvantaged children to camp fee-free. Since it began, the program has sent more than 2,000 kids to camp.