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Camp Wekeela changed Willie Garson’s life 11 summers in a row.

INTERVIEW BY CHRISS RYMER

Welcome to my camp. WILLIE GARSON, 48, star of White Collar and Sex and the City, spent 11 of his Wonder Bread years at Camp Wekeela on Bear Pond near Lewiston. He had an unforgettable time here—and not just because Patrick Dempsey, pre-McDreamy, clowned around at the same site.

You’ve shared 11 of our summers with us, first as a camper and later as a counselor, at Camp Wekeela. What was it like when you first arrived?
I was terrified, nine years old. Luckily, my brother came to camp with me.

But what was great about it was, it’s an old-fashioned camp, idyllic, which means something even more now than when I was a kid.
Willie Garson officially adopts Nathon as his son in Los Angeles in 2010.

Cabins on a lake, hiking, amazing air, and a deep forest.

Help us taste the pleasures of camp.
I always loved cafeteria food, and I still do. I loved their burgers and drinking all that sweet juice we called “bug juice”—and the pies.

We went to camp near Bear Mountain, and it was covered with wild blueberries. You could pick them, and the kitchen would make a pie for your table. Maine blueberries are so sweet.

Every camp has its bullies. Tell us about a time you were under pressure.

Never really, but you could definitely pick out the kids early on who were troublemakers. Which is one of the things camp is great for.

Any excursions to metropolitan destinations?

When we got to go to the big city—Portland—it was the most exciting thing ever. It was a big deal to go to Carbur’s.

How did Wekeela change you?

There’s things you do in camp like archery, pottery, and sailing. When you have the chance to do any of these things in your life, it changes you—like in August when Maine has all those crazy meteor showers. You definitely come home from camp talking like a sailor. My mother never appreciated that.

Has camp changed since you shared your summers with us?

When I was a counselor and we had bad kids, I’d make them stand out on the porch at night in the pitch black in their underwear for five minutes. If you did that now, you’d be arrested for child abuse.

We know there were black flies. But did you get the acting bug at camp?
We always did a play. I particularly remember doing *You’re a Good Man, Charlie Brown*. That was a big deal, because you felt like such a star and big shot the night of your show. Everyone’s looking at you.
Is there a camp activity you’ve advised Nathon to steer away from, from wood-burning to gimp weaving?
The most important thing I try and get him away from is anything electronic. The problem with modern camps and kids is, they actually have computers at camps.

One of the reasons I chose the camp he goes to is because they say “no electronics.” Last year, when I talked to Nathon on the phone, I found out they were allowed to play with them for an hour a day on break, and he asked me to send him his Nintendo. I said, “No. That’s not why you’re at camp.”

Have you and Patrick Dempsey, who also visited Camp Wekeela, ever shared stories from the good old days?
Patrick went to a clown camp that was a Wekeela rental, before camp was in session. He never actually went to Camp Wekeela.

I did go to camp with Henry Garfield, who became [musician, author, and performance artist] Henry Rollins, though, and we’ve talked about it.

Our favorite line of yours in Sex and the City is when Carrie falls on the runway and you say, “Oh, my God, she’s fashion roadkill!” Did Jenny Bicks write that? She grew up in Castine, on the ocean, and still spends her summers there.
It was probably our executive producer Michael Patrick. The cleverer the quip, the more likely it was his, and that was a perfect episode of Sex and the City.

I did know Jenny was from Maine. We’ve talked about it before—I’ve been sniffing around for a vacation home.

Sarah Jessica Parker’s told us her first independent acting assignment after Annie was to work at Portland Stage. She was allowed to travel here alone—a big, fun adventure.
I did not know that. I speak to her almost every day—I’ll bring that up.

When was the last time you were in Maine?
Last summer, taking Nathon to camp. We fly in and head up to Boothbay Harbor and spend the night. We have a great lobster dinner at the Lobster Dock and go duckpin bowling. There’s a place called Monkey C Monkey Do [in Wiscasset] that we like to go to.

I drop him off and go back to work. I don’t know why kids get to go to camp—grown-ups should get to go.

What kind of Maine tour would you give a visitor?
Everything, of course, for me is about food. Lobster rolls and blueberry pie are
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an obsession.
They’d have to check out Acadia National Park for sure, and I’m a big fan of Boothbay Harbor. They’d spend some time on a lake, any lake in a much less populated area. And I’d hit anywhere you can find a high mountain on the Appalachian Trail.
The reality is, I would do Freeport if you’ve never been to Maine, to see what goes on around L.L. Bean and all the fishing villages. The problem you have with Maine, I tell people, is everywhere you are is a great place to be. Brunswick, Augusta, Portland, it’s all great.

Judd Nelson is just a couple of years older than you. He’s from Portland. Is there a Camp Wekeela connection there, too?
I know him rather well. He went to Waynflete School with a number of people from my summer camp.

What did Camp Wekeela provide you with that Yale couldn’t?
What you learn mostly at camp is interpersonal relationships. Camp’s a gentler environment that builds that over time. I know kids who went off to college, and it was their first time ever not standing next to their parents.
You certainly don’t read in the paper about the axe murderer who spent seven seasons in a Maine camp.

When people recognize you on the street, do they call you Stanford Blatch, or are you Mozzie now?
It’s getting to be about fifty-fifty. The iconic, ridiculous success of Sex and the City is hard to get away from—not that I want to; it’s just there. But it’s very satisfying to see how into the new show people are getting.

Tell us about White Collar and the directions it’s taking.
I did an episode of [Mental] for Fox Television Studios, our production company, in Bogotá, Colombia, for Fox International. When I came home, they called and said I did really great and they were developing a new show as a companion piece for Burn Notice. I read the script, and it was fantastic. [White Collar] really came to me, which was great.

As far as the writing and the mind-set of Mozzie are concerned, especially his humor, he’s probably the character closest to myself I’ve ever played, so that makes it a lot of fun.

At Camp Wekeela, who was the Neal Caffrey character?
I was probably more the Neal at camp. Be-
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caus I was so plugged in, I was a counselor by the time I was 16. You run into Neals all your life--it's the kid who has everything wired from kindergarten onward.

Some actors get cast as a particular figure over and over, like Ed Herrmann as FDR, or Sam Waterston as Abraham Lincoln. What's with you and Lee Harvey Oswald?
I had auditions for JFK, and I knew they weren't going to hire me because I wasn't famous at all. Of course they hired Gary Oldman, who was wonderful.
As soon as I was done I got a call. They heard I looked like Oswald. So I went in for Ruby, and they were dying to have me--a wonderful feeling for an actor. The executive producer told me he'd been in Korea with Lee Harvey Oswald [and that] I was the definitive Oswald. So I did it.
After that, Mad TV was just starting, and they wanted to do a Lee Harvey Oswald sketch. They thought it would be funny if the guy who was playing Oswald all over the place did it as a joke.

If you're a Mets fan, what made them cast you in Fever Pitch?
I do all of the Farrelly brothers' movies. Fever Pitch is the first they did where it wasn't their movie--they were hired guns. I was the only one of their regular players they were allowed to sneak in, mostly because of my friendship with Drew Barrymore.

Is there any chance an episode will take place in Maine?
I'd love it. Unfortunately, the way the economics work, it ends up being about credits. It seems right now Louisiana is winning the battle for the highest credit, so everything is shooting there right now.

If White Collar were to shoot an episode up here, what Maine art would Mozzie and Neal be interested in “acquiring”? Maybe a Wyeth or an Indiana?
Possibly. I think they'd actually go for an entire ocean-front mansion if there were a way to steal it.

Now you have us thinking. What twist might have brought NYPD Blue here? Could you have taken Star Trek: Voyager to Maine?
I'd love to have seen [gruff NYPD Blue star] Henry Caulfield in Maine. He was such a city, horse-gambler type.
I know nothing about [Star Trek], other than my episode. And to be honest, I had no idea what I was talking about! It was all in Star Trek talk.
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