



Steve Hallowell, MBA '84,  
owner and director of  
Netop Summer Camp  
in Casco, Maine

# a letter from camp

**A FORMER COUNSELOR LEAVES CORPORATE AMERICA**



**AND REVISITS HIS YOUTH**

By JOHN CRAWFORD

Photography by BRIAN FITZGERALD



**With days full of swimming, fishing, and making friends, life at Netop Summer Camp hasn't changed much since it opened in the 1950s. Netop's owner, Steve Hallowell, hopes campers will continue to experience the camp's timeless ways of having fun for generations to come.**



**DURING A CAREFREE DAY** at Netop Summer Camp, sailboats drift in the breeze, toy rockets whoosh into the sky, and campers fish off a rock in a special spot where the bass seem to congregate, as if they can't wait to be pulled from the water. Netop is a place of freedom, where campers taste their first sweet moments of independence. It's also a place of friendship, where bonds form fast over songs sung and tall tales told during Saturday night campfires. "Many of these kids just met each other two weeks ago," says Steve Hallowell, MBA '84, Netop's owner and director, as he looks out over the water of the camp's secluded Birch Pond. "Now they're best buddies."

Spending a summer here, much less a career, doesn't seem like a bad idea. For some 25 years, Hallowell worked in corporate America. He enjoyed it, but eventually longed for more than endless meetings and the bureaucracy of business. He wanted to feel a personal connection to something, so when the chance came to take over the old summer camp that he attended as a boy, he went for it. "You don't come across this type of opportunity more than once," he says.

Now he spends his summer days at the 100-acre camp located in Casco, Maine, in the state's picturesque Sebago Lake region.



At the center of Netop's grounds, Hollowell often sits on a bench where the camp's sounds surround him. He can hear the strum of acoustic guitars and the whack of a bat against a ball. As endless games of tetherball play on, the ball wrapping and unwrapping around a pole, he may pull a homesick child over to chat, or find himself dragged into a game of octopus tag.

Not that his days are all fun and games. Being a camp owner is a yearlong job involving a wide range of work: marketing, staffing, camper recruiting, and program and facilities planning. When camp is in session, Hollowell faces full days that begin before the morning flag raising and end after the nightly playing of taps.

Taking over the boys camp in the first place wasn't easy, considering it had been closed for almost 20 years.

## The Reopening

Netop (pronounced "nee-tope") is a Native American word for "friend." Sitting next to the 1,035-foot Rattlesnake Mountain, named for the snakes that once slithered

there centuries ago, Netop opened in 1956, and about 2,500 boys attended the camp during the next 32 seasons. Hollowell was there for 10 of those summers, six as a camper and four as a counselor, beginning in 1968. "I had it in my blood," Hollowell says. At the age of 15, he even met his wife, Beth, at the camp when she was dating a counselor.

Netop closed in 1987 when the owners retired, but the memories of Hollowell's camp days lingered. Wouldn't it be won-



derful to reopen Netop someday, he thought. In the mid-2000s, he began investigating the possibility and found that most of the camp's facilities were gone. "I thought it was a long shot to reopen it," he says. "Setting up the camp from scratch, you need the entrepreneurial spirit." Hollowell credits his Babson education for giving him just that.

In 2005, he held a reunion for Netop alumni at the camp. Their support, in terms of money, time, and camper referrals, would be crucial for success. About 225 people showed up. "People were very enthusiastic," he says. "It gave me a boost." He then worked hard to spread the word about the camp, which wasn't always easy. He once traveled to a Baltimore private

school, but not a single parent or student came to hear him talk.

The moment of truth came in 2006 when Hallowell left his job at Towers Perrin and readied himself for the camp's reopening. The numbers were small that first season, just 38 campers, but they've grown steadily with each successive year. "You get one person, and they tell someone, and it builds from that point," he says. This summer saw 128 campers come from Spain, France, Italy, and 16 states.

For all those campers, Hallowell wishes one thing: an experience that will stand with the memorable moments of their

lives. When Netop staff first meet for training, a slide announcing this goal starts the presentation. "We're creating a top life experience," Hallowell says.

## A Time Warp

Part of that experience is the growth campers feel, Hallowell says. Living on their own and making friends, they gain confidence. They feel free to try things at camp, such as acting or singing, that they wouldn't under the more rigid social environment of their schools back home.

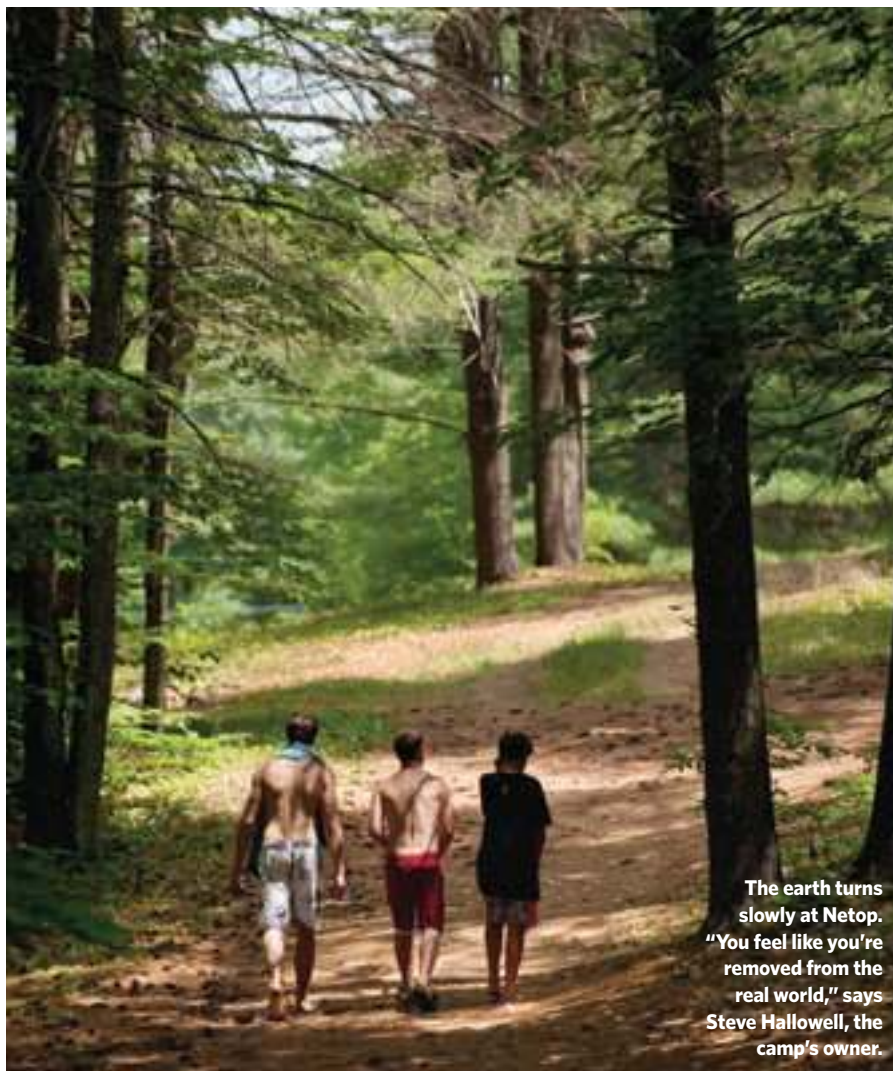
The camp stresses to campers the Netop philosophy, which is based on four

spokes of a wagon wheel, with each spoke representing a different component of life: mental, social, physical, and spiritual. Counselors encourage growth in all four areas. "If one spoke is weak, the wheel won't turn easily," says Hallowell, who lives in Maple Glen, Pa., during the off-season with wife, Beth, now a Netop nurse, and their three children, who have all worked at the camp as well.

A wagon wheel symbolizing the Netop philosophy hangs inside the lodge, which is the camp's main gathering place. Dating back to the 1920s, when it was used as a dance hall, the lodge is the lone building surviving from Netop's early days, so it's full of camp history. Detailed listings hang on the wall of which team won the camp's tribal games every year, the Mohawks or Apaches, and who holds camp records for various athletic achievements, such as the longest Frisbee toss and longest pingpong volley. Hallowell himself still holds the record for the 50-yard dash, 6.6 seconds, which was set in 1969.

Such history and tradition loom large over Netop. "It hasn't changed much from when I was a camper," Hallowell says. Indeed, none of the technological distractions of modern life, from cell phones to video games to iPods, are allowed, so campers have fun the old-fashioned way. When Hallowell walks through the row of platform tents at night, the flaps rolled up so campers sleep in the open air under a canopy of pines, he's taken back to old times. Reopening Netop may have given him the entrepreneurial thrill of owning his own business, but it also reconnected him with his youth.

"I have the best job in the world," says Hallowell. "I have the opportunity to build a lasting and treasured experience, and the icing on the cake is that it's something so connected to me personally."



The earth turns slowly at Netop. "You feel like you're removed from the real world," says Steve Hallowell, the camp's owner.