

90 YEARS

OF CREATING OPPORTUNITIES

PINE TREE SOCIETY

BY JESSICA GENDRON-LABBE | PHOTOGRAPHY PROVIDED BY PINE TREE SOCIETY

On the shore of North Pond in Rome, Maine, Pine Tree Camp has spent 81 years rewriting what a summer camp can be.

Children and adults with disabilities arrive each season to swim, hike, paddle, climb, and try things their families were once told were impossible.

This October, Pine Tree Society, the nonprofit that runs the camp and a statewide network of programs, will mark its 90th anniversary with a free community celebration in Auburn called Pine Tree Palooza. It's a milestone for an organization whose central promise hasn't changed since 1945 – **no camper who can benefit is ever turned away.**

A Camp Built Without Barriers

A typical week at Pine Tree Camp is packed full of fun, according to Dawn Willard-Robinson, who oversees camp programming. The campus is fully accessible, barrier-free, and the activity list reads like any traditional Maine camp – hiking, swimming, boating, kayaking, canoeing, paddleboarding, archery, biking, arts and crafts, overnight camping, and team sports including basketball, tennis, soccer, and floor hockey. There's also a low ropes challenge course and what staff describe as Maine's only fully accessible treehouse.

"There are no limits on the activities campers can participate in," Willard-Robinson says. "We make sure campers can try anything they'd like to experience."

Willard-Robinson is sure to clearly define the distinction between accessible and barrier-free. Plenty of camps have ramps for cabins and adaptive equipment for a few activities, but Pine Tree Camp builds the entire experience around full participation.

"It's not enough to just be at the waterfront," she explains. "We make sure everyone can get into the water and out on the boat."

Adaptive equipment supports every activity, with options tailored to each camper. The result is what staff call challenge by choice, with new experiences, new friendships, and a confidence that campers take home with them.

A Workforce Program Unlike Any Other in Maine

One of the camp's most distinctive offerings is Leaders in Training, a paid employment program for teens and young adults of all abilities. To Pine Tree Society's knowledge, it's the only program of its kind in the state. Participants build real-world job skills, explore career paths, and gain independence in an inclusive environment. The kind of experience that can shape their belief in what's possible.

A Promise That Has Held Since 1945

Adria King, who works in development for Pine Tree Society, says the open-door policy is the heart of the organization. Since 1945, no camper who can benefit has been turned away because of an inability to pay. The math behind that promise is significant.

"We receive no state or federal funding and, every year — we must raise over two million dollars to operate camp," King says. "Nearly one million of that provides tuition assistance for families in need."

More than 95% of camp families need help to attend. The camp is also one of the only camps for people with disabilities in Maine and is accredited by the American Camp Association, which King points out is the only camp-accrediting body in the United States. Its standards are demanding and reviewed annually.

Stories That Stay With Families

What families take home from Pine Tree Camp tends to be larger than a week of activities. King shares the story of a camper named Sebastian, whose parents hadn't expected him to want to participate in anything requiring coordination or teamwork.

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"That first year, he rode a three-wheeled bike and loved it. It gave him a lot of confidence," his parents shared, according to a piece published on the Pine Tree Society website.

Sebastian now has his own bike at home and rides around the neighborhood. What his parents hoped for most, they said in the piece, was for him to feel like part of the group, and that's what happened.

Another camper, Sophia, lives in a rural part of Washington County. Her family thought camp might be a way for her to meet people and try new things, but they weren't sure whether she'd be comfortable staying overnight on her own.

"I was so surprised that she stayed overnight," Sophia's mother said in another story on the organization's website. "She absolutely loved it, and when I picked her up she was already counting down to next summer."

Pine Tree Palooza at Lost Valley

On Saturday, October 10, Pine Tree Society will mark its 90th anniversary with Pine Tree Palooza at Lost Valley in Auburn. The celebration runs from 1:00 PM to 10:00 PM and features live 90's music from Hello Newman, Jay McClure, and others, along with a competitive cornhole tournament, food, brews, a kid zone, and chair lift rides.

The signature event is the Inflatable Costume 90-Yard Dash. The distance was chosen to represent the organization's 90 years, and King says the image of costumed racers barreling toward the finish line captures the spirit of the day.

Admission is free, donations are welcome, and all proceeds support Pine Tree Society's programs. Several area nonprofits will also be on site, and King says the goal is a true community gathering.

"We have several other non-profits who plan to table," says King. "We're focused on making this a community event for other groups to promote their services as well."

How to Get Involved

Registration for summer camp typically opens in February and runs through June. Two specialized late-summer programs continue to accept applications after that – Camp Communicate, for campers who use assistive technology, and Dirigo Experience, for young adults who are deaf or hard of hearing. The organization also offers year-round recreational opportunities promoted through its website and social media.

Beyond camp, there are plenty of ways the community can participate. King says the development team offers personal tours of Pine Tree Camp year-round,

and an active volunteer program brings in both individuals and corporate groups throughout the season. The facility is also available for retreats and rentals from May through September. The Flutie 5K returns to Pine Tree Camp this fall for its fifth year, taking participants along fully accessible trails through woods and the waterfront. "It's like running through a postcard," King says.

A Statewide Mission

Pine Tree Camp is one of many programs offered by Pine Tree Society. Statewide services range from assistive technology to community engagement support. The Early Learning Center, a specialized preschool, is located in Auburn, along with Community Support services for adults.

For King, nearly five years into her time with Pine Tree Society, the community behind the mission is what stands out.

"Whether it's local celebrities fundraising for our Snowmobile Ride-In, Colby College students coming out to run the Flutie 5k at Pine Tree Camp or an ATV club raising over \$10,000 by hosting a Poker Run, we are truly lucky to live a community that supports our mission," King says. **LA**

Pine Tree Society
pinetreesociety.org

