



# Campfire Tales

*Sleep-away adventures at Autostraddle's A-Camp 4.0.*

BY EVELINA MINERO | PHOTOS BY ROBIN ROEMER

## Wednesday, October 9

Imagine 300 queer women and trans people camping together, 16 to a two-bathroom heated cabin in the San Bernardino Mountains—that's what awaited me last fall as I arrived at LAX by way of SFO at 9 a.m.

Heading to A-Camp for the first time, I recalled my memories of being a camp counselor and an undergrad at Randolph-Macon Woman's College. I imagined A-Camp would be something like both those experiences: safe, welcoming and liberating. I was right. I noticed a congregation of women in the airport and introduced myself, catching each of their names and some of their stories. By the time I got on the shuttle—and I do recommend taking the shuttle to A-Camp. It's a safe space, within a bubble, and makes you feel welcome before camp even starts—I felt like I had about 100 new queer friends and things were off to a great start.

I met Brittney from Louisiana. This was her second year at A-Camp. She told me about the color wars, how different cabins compete to win the title of the color war champion. I met Kate from Illinois. She was filled with energy and conversation, and she brought me back an iced vanilla latte on her airport Starbucks run. I met Cassie and Karrie from Canada. I learned about the political climate in their country, and their passion for and involvement with music. I told



them that I was performing standup for the first time at the A-Camp Carnival, that I'd be giving a CAMP Talk as well, and that I hadn't prepared for either one. They promised to sit up front, cheer me on, and laugh at my jokes, even if I wasn't funny.

As we were entering the campgrounds,

I felt like Lucy from *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* when she exits the wardrobe into a snow-covered forest. As I walked toward the registration cabin among 60 other queers, my carry-on in one hand and my backpack over my shoulder, I saw campers who'd arrived before us already making snow angels



## Thursday, October 10

A-Camp is part sleep-away camp, part conference, and all queer. Each day, there's a mix of panels, workshops, and outdoor activities. The panels are interactive and the audience participation is heavy. They aren't just one-way conversations—they're group discussions.

My favorite panel today was *Crazy/Beautiful*. It was about mental health within the queer community. In general, mental health issues are grossly misrepresented and shrouded in shame. I was diagnosed with bipolar disorder about a year ago, and it was both surreal and amazing to listen to so many people talk openly about their depression and anxiety, their bipolar, eating, or borderline personality disorders. Just as it is with our sexuality, if our mental health status differs from the accepted norm, we're taught to keep it to ourselves. That panel put a lot of faces to labels that most people identify as "other," and that included staff, counselors, and campers. It normalized the variety within the mental health spec-



trum. At first, I felt anxious walking into that panel. By the end of it, I realized that I still held on to shame around my mood disorder, and through the discussion at that panel, through those shared stories, and through A-Camp, I was able to begin to let go of that shame.

and throwing snowballs. When we neared the registration cabin, we were greeted by "Hello"s and "Welcome"s. It was surreal to be in this queer utopian society where everyone was open and friendly. As someone who feels truly at home in very few environments, I have to say this was one of them.



## Friday, October 11

Today was filled with a lot of my favorite activities: the Tardy for the Party panel, the A-Camp Carnival, performing my first standup routine during Comedy Night, and dancing at A-Camp-alooza and Club Deer. Every night, Deer Cabin turned from a venue where we attended panels and workshops into our very own night-

club. A different A-Camp staff would DJ each night and it was the spot for debauchery, dancing and drinking. The Tardy for the Party panel, about coming out later in life, has been my favorite so far, and it was the panel I could relate to least. Staff and campers shared their stories about not realizing they were queer until further into adulthood, and what it was like to come out and explore their sexuality later in life. Some of them spoke about ending their marriages, about what it's like to start dating again after they'd had kids, and feeling silly exploring their gender expression later in life. It was great being exposed to a diversity of experiences and people outside my daily life.



## Saturday, October 12

I filled my day with interviews, a wine tasting, CAMP Talks—they're like TED Talks—and queer prom. Today was a lot more slow-paced, not due to a lack of activities but because I made one-on-one conversations my main focus. I interviewed a handful of staff and campers about their A-Camp experience (you can watch all my interviews at [curvemag.com](http://curvemag.com)).

On my way to Club Deer, where I had planned to interview some people during the Femmecraft workshop, I ran into Kathy Wolfe, the founder of Wolfe Video, and her girlfriend, Barbara Verhage. That was one of the highlights of my day. They told me that when they were younger they went to a similar queer camp, in fact it was how they first met, although they didn't start dating until 10 years later. I learned how Wolfe Video and Lesbian.com got started, and we talked about the progression of LGBT rights during Kathy's lifetime. She's really looking to younger generations to carry on this work of furthering our rights. I felt honored that she and Barbara shared some of their history and some of their hopes with me.

I took away a lot from A-Camp. I left feeling more at home with myself, more in love with myself, and more accepting of myself. I also left with new friends and great relationships that I'll foster outside of A-Camp—that is, until we reunite next year! (a-camp.org) ●

