

SQUAM: A Gathering in the Woods



Photo by Thea Coughlin

by Mira Rubiano

I was 27 and feeling completely lost the first time I attended Squam Art Workshops. Not only was I desperate to answer my big life questions, but I also feared art; however, something about the experience called to me. I had learned about Squam through a new friend who would be teaching at the workshop that year. Something about the experience called to me. Despite my doubts and insistence that I was not an artist I signed up at the last possible minute. Squam saved me and helped me discover that I am indeed an artist.

Squam is a place of pure magic: A five-day art workshop retreat held regularly on Squam Lake in New Hampshire. It offers a break from daily life, an escape to nature, an opportunity to hone an artistic craft, and a chance to learn a new craft in a safe setting. Most importantly, it offers a chance to connect with like-minded souls, to bear witness, and to be seen. Kindred spirits are drawn together from all corners of the world to forge connections that last a lifetime; the kind that shake the fear out of you, markedly change your course, and empower you to become a greater version of yourself than you ever dreamed possible.

THE UTAH CONNECTION

Amy Wuthrich and Jenica Simons-McKenzie lived only eight miles from each other in Salt Lake City, Utah, but their paths most likely never would have crossed without Squam. “We were in totally different social circles,” explains Amy. “I am a scientist and my circle was limited to the people I bike with and work with, and Jenica had her artist friends.”

The two women met at the first Squam gathering in 2008. Around a bonfire the first night, Amy, who had reservations about signing up and was admittedly unsure about what she would be doing “with a bunch of artists and yogis,” said Jenica, appeared out of nowhere: “She just sort of bobbed into my space and said ‘Hey! I’m from Salt Lake City!’”

After that first encounter, the two realized they had more than just a city in common. Among other things, both mothers of four had baby daughters only one month apart in age. “It was good to know I was going back to Salt Lake with a ‘mom friend,’” says Amy. After returning home, the women saw more of each other, and nine months later, a new baby was born — Jenica’s Random Art Workshop (RAW) nights, hosted regularly at Amy’s house. >

Now the two live down the street from one another. They see each other at least once a week. Their children have grown into siblings. And they have returned to Squam together three times since that first fall session. “Amy has been my sounding board, my rock, and vice versa,” says Jenica. “A lot has changed over these five years, and we have been there to support one another. Our friendship is multilayered and everything is out on the table. In many ways, Amy and I are opposites – we are yin and yang – but we balance each other. For the first time I get to be completely authentic to who I am. She has shown me that I don’t have to change who I am to be accepted and loved.”

“This only could have happened in the woods of New Hampshire,” adds Amy.

FRIENDS FOR LIFE

In 2011 and 2012, Squam served as the chosen reunion spot for long-time friends Rena Diana and Louise Cadwell. “It was the perfect point of connection. It offers everything that Louise and I, as individuals and friends, enjoy – art, beauty, natural surroundings, open-minded people,” says Rena.

The pair met at Middlebury College in 1967 as students and have been best friends ever since. Louise believes their strong friendship is due to the parallel trajectories they have lived, sharing personal, professional, and geographic connections throughout the years. Both women are educators, writers, and world travelers. ▶



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An important element of their friendship, they agree, is that they make time for one another. “We started making it a habit to go on trips together, to see each other at least once a year,” says Rena. They chose Squam as a meeting point after Louise read about it on a blog. “I thought it would be something I’d love to do. It brings together so many arts that I love, and on beautiful Squam Lake,” she says. “I love what it stands for – creativity, fun, connection, relationships, good food, laughter, music, and taking time to do something for yourself.”

“I hope Louise and I can go back together again and again,” adds Rena. “Squam is a place where mind, body, and spirit are both fed and set free; a place where you can connect with the land, friends, and yourself; a place enkindling creative expression and a delight in being present.”

THE SOUL-SISTER TRIO

The first Squam session in 2008, as with every subsequent gathering, sparked countless sets of new friends such as that of Amy and Jenica. Another such friendship blossomed among three midwestern creative souls. Kelly Barton and Tracey Duncan were assigned to room together in the Hamilton cabin and Sarah Ward Terrell was to be their cabin mate.

“[With] the three of us, it was instant kinship, an immediate bond, a comfortable connection that can’t be explained by the intellect and that only the soul truly understands,” says Tracey.



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For Tracey, having met these women in the Squam setting was particularly powerful. She had gone to Squam with a dream to paint, and it was there that she found courage to step into her painter self, with encouragement, from Sarah, who told Tracey she liked her work, and from Kelly, who called Tracey an artist. After that point, "I painted every chance I could get. I made our dining room into a studio. Painting supplies are ever-available, and it has become a part of our culture at home."

The trio remained in close contact after that first Squam, and since then they have made getting together a ritual. Their first reunion took place at Sarah's house in Columbus, Ohio, the following spring. They returned for Fall Squam together that year and in May 2010 met up at Kelly's house in Indianapolis. In 2011, Tracey hosted at her home in Memphis.

"We love each other," says Tracey. "We challenge each other. We believe in each other. We see each other. We understand each other. We are soul sisters."

The visionary and founder behind the Squam magic is Elizabeth Duvivier, an artist, writer, and as Rena says, "one of the fairies from 'A Midsummer Night's Dream.'"

Elizabeth's intuitive gift for matchmaking is equally as strong as her sense for creating a safe and inviting space to foster creativity. "She has this ethereal, light, loving quirkiness," says Rena. "She has some kind of magic that she weaves through and makes the whole week look almost effortless. And that is what a great piece of art is about."

Sarah attributes her friendship with Kelly and Tracey in great part to the unique environment Elizabeth creates. "[Kelly, Tracey, and I] all love to laugh, and I think we'd been drawn to Squam for similar reasons. We were attracted by the open, easy-going vibe embodied by Elizabeth and the instructors whose work we knew, as well as by the opportunity to connect with other like-minded creative types."

In my experience, Elizabeth's greatest talent is drawing such a varied yet balanced group of people together. When asked how she does this, Elizabeth smiles and says, "I just put up the Bat Signal and you all come flocking." *

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