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More Than Just Cookies: Rethinking the Girl Scouts

By Karen Ball / Camp Daisy

Leaning against the fence of a simple horse barn one recent Sunday afternoon, Lynn Gentine wistfully watched her oldest daughter, 13-year-old Mikayla, groom a chestnut mare named Sadie for perhaps the last time. The horse program, an activity of the local Girl Scouts council, is shutting down as the organization suffers declining membership and dwindling resources. The council itself is being merged with another, which doesn't need Camp Daisy's horses.

"She's not at the mall, she's not on the Internet, she's not texting her friends," Gentine says of the time her teenager spends cleaning stables and teaching young Brownies about horses, riding and safety. Camp Daisy is a hilly, wooded haven in eastern Kansas, not far from Topeka, where the Flint Hills meet the westward-sweeping tallgrass. It's named after [Juliette "Daisy" Low, who founded Girl Scouts in 1912.](#)

Nearly 100 years later, Girl Scouts are fighting to stay relevant and hip. Shuttering camps is a difficult and emotional side effect of an ambitious plan to streamline Girl Scouts and roll out a whole new "leadership" program to revive interest in the 2.6 million-girl organization.

With membership falling by 250,000 in just five years, the Scouts have done a lot of soul searching. The group hired a management consultant and marketing team and laid out a "core business strategy" to make its programs "more purposeful," as one executive put it. Although [November is cookie month](#) — your doorbell may be ringing — the Scouts don't want to be known for cookies and camping anymore. Instead, executives use phrases like "outcomes-based," "pathways," "gap teams," "fading brand image" and "market share" to describe the new approach. ([See pictures of pioneering women in space.](#)) ([See pictures of pioneering women in sports.](#))

Part of that approach involves reducing the number of local Girl Scout councils from 312 to 109 through mergers. In some cases, the newly merged councils have more facilities than they need. For example, when Camp Daisy moved under the umbrella of the Kansas City, Mo., council, officers took a cold look at the rustic horse barn. The council already has a state-of-the-art Scout Equestrian center two hours away, which made Daisy's horse program an easy target. ([The Scouts are still trying to figure out just what to do with Daisy's 23 horses.](#))

In all, about half of the enlarged Kansas City council's 1,700 acres of camps are being "rested" for a year while final decisions are made about their fates. That includes Camp Oakledge, a 420-acre lakefront retreat in the Missouri Ozarks with a mile of shoreline. To some, "rested" is just a way of saying that the camps will be sold. "It's difficult, but it's necessary to ensure the future of this organization," says Girl

Scout spokeswoman Gina Garvin of the Kansas City area. Camps cost the council \$1.7 million last year, so something has to give, she explains.

Due to sagging cookie sales, a drop-off in donations and investment losses, the Kansas City council expects a \$1.6 million loss this year. Each council has its own budget, separate from the national organization's \$70 million. Nationally in 2007, Scouts lost \$1 million in membership dues and another \$1 million in grants and gifts.

Near Racine, Wis., Scouts just sold a camp for \$7 million — they'd been trying to unload it for years due to a lack of use. In New York, 65 acres along the Great Peconic Bay was sold in 2006 because girls just weren't attending camp. In New Jersey, three councils merged into a single group with six camps — two of which weren't being used much. Those two probably won't operate next summer, says Mary Connell, CEO of Girl Scouts of Central and Southern New Jersey, which will do a cost-benefit analysis of all the region's camps.

"We have a saying — we're operating at the speed of girls," Connell said. It became clear 10 years ago that girls were no longer into pitching tents. Now they prefer "yurts," circular huts modeled after the homes of Central Asian nomads — but featuring Western amenities like electricity and handicap accessibility. "These are 21st Century girls," says Connell. "They, at the very least, want to be near a cell phone tower."

As part of their soul-searching, the Girl Scouts found that girls were so bombarded with after-school sports, lessons and high-octane homework that neither they nor their parents found Girl Scouts compelling enough to keep on the calendar. "It was a brutal truth we had to confront," says Cathy Tisdale, the Girl Scouts national vice president for "mission to market." So they set out to become the "premiere leadership organization for girls." Troops and badges will still exist — but girls can also choose to take "journeys" instead, opting, for instance, to make a six-week foray into the community for service, rather than meeting once a month in a church basement.

"It's not putting the uniform on and the cookies in front of the store anymore," says Susan Swanson, vice president of membership and volunteerism. "The old troop model is not dead, but we've got flexible options." Meeting monthly to hear a troop leader talk may be a yawner, Swanson says, "but if there's a cool career seminar on Saturday, they'll say, OK."

A new set of handbooks guide the "journeys," offering exercises in critical thinking, ethical decision making, "assessing team dynamics" and "community asset mapping." Is Juliette Low rolling in her grave as camps close down to make way for jazzier Web content and global networking? Lee Ann Maley, a Girl Scout executive in South Carolina, believes that the founder would approve of the new model of assertive girlhood. "We're doing more with science, technology, engineering and math," Maley says. "I think Juliette Low would be standing up and blowing her horn — the girls can do it, too."